UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Puerto Rico: Corruption and Coloniality

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Arts

in

Latin American Studies

by

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2025

The Thesis of Gabriel Enrique Bonilla is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2025

DEDICATION

To all those who have come before, and all those who will come after.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NPP	New Progressive Party
PDP	Popular Democratic Party
PIP	Puerto Rico Independence Party
MVC	Citizens Victory Movement
CAREF	Fiscal and Economic Reconstruction Advising Committee
PROMESA	Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act
FOMB	Financial Oversight and Management Board

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the Latin American Studies Department at UCSD for their endless support and inspiration, and for allowing me the opportunity to explore multiple disciplines to produce this paper.

I would also like to acknowledge Professor Juan Pablo Pardo Guerra, Professor José Fusté, and Professor Ribas for their support as my committee. Their guidance has proved to be invaluable.

Most of all, I would like to acknowledge my family for instilling in me the discipline and dedication necessary to complete this paper. I'm forever grateful for your endless love and encouragement.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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University of California San Diego, 2025

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This paper expands on Anibal Quijano's theory of coloniality to introduce the role of corruption in maintaining power over the civil administration using Puerto Rico as a case study. Data from the 2020 gubernatorial elections and the subsequent congressional hearings on bills addressing Puerto Rico's status issue illuminate how Puerto Rico's party structure, as a dialogue with the United States Congress, perpetuates corruption and economic violence, stalling

congressional action addressing Puerto Rico's colonial political status. The paper's results provide supporting evidence for creating a status convention to address the decolonization of Puerto Rico, similar to the one proposed by Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez's H.R. 2070, the Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2021.

Introduction

After World War II, the United States of America led the world, ushering ideals of self-determination and decolonization while relinquishing the political binds of its colonies, like the Philippines in 1946. Despite this noble and righteous nation vying for global hegemony against the USSR by taking the moral high ground to attract the friendship of international allies, they did not relinquish all their colonial assets. Puerto Rico presents a contemporary example of a continued colonial relationship that evolved during the Cold War. In 1953, Puerto Rico was removed from the United Nations' list of non-self-governing territories by establishing the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Despite the new constitution for the archipelago, Puerto Rico's political status remained unchanged within the U.S. Constitution as an unincorporated territory. The veneer of democracy in the Caribbean nation has all but eroded, more than 7 decades later. In 2016, the signing of PROMESA into law placed Puerto Rico's fiscal autonomy in the hands of the Financial Oversight and Management Board, and the Supreme Court case *Puerto Rico v. Sánchez Valle*[1] which reiterated Puerto Rico did not have the power to litigate in its own courts, cracked the veneer of the archipelago's sovereignty[2]. Despite the international image of Puerto Rico's self-governance, the continued political control did not elude many on the island. Since modern history, Puerto Rico's politics have been defined by the pursuit of varying depths of integration with the metropole.

Although Puerto Rico remains a territory, the change from Spanish to American rule, the establishment of a new constitution, and the ever-evolving insular laws create an interesting case

[1] Puerto Rico v. Sanchez Valle is a court case that reached the Supreme Court in 2016. The case ruled that two individuals could not prosecuted for gun charges in local courts. Instead, the court ruled that the case was to be litigated at the federal level shattering any lingering illusion of Puerto Rico's sovereignty (Meléndez-Badillo 2024)
[2] While autonomy offers a degree of self-governance within a state, sovereignty refers to the ultimate, or supreme authority of a state to govern over its territory and people.

for applying Annibal Quijano's theory of the coloniality of power. Quijano's coloniality of power illuminates two axes of power with a Eurocentric rationale as a framework for projecting colonial power, and traces how they continue to exist today despite much of the Western hemisphere achieving independence. The first axis of power was the establishment of a new racial social classification dominated by the European. The other is "the constitution of a new structure of control of labor and its resources" in the form of global capitalism. Quijano relates the two axes of power, demonstrating how "both race and the division of labor remained structurally linked and mutually reinforcing." For example, he explains that "as the dominant race, Spanish and Portuguese whites" could be independent producers of commodities while nonwhite persons were either enslaved or confined to serfdom. Moreover, only nobles could participate in the high-to-midrange positions in the military and civil colonial administration. "Consequently, the control of a specific form of labor could be, at the same time, the control of a specific group of dominated people" (Quijano 2000, p. 537). In the case of Puerto Rico, its twice-colonized status creates a layered rationality of Eurocentrism in the form of hispanophilia[3] operating at the insular level, and Americanism at the federal level. A look at the contemporary relationship with the U.S. reveals how the methods for maintaining sovereignty over the civil colonial administration have evolved since the start of the 19th century.

Colonial governance in Puerto Rico has been dominated by a local elite empowered by subsidies for their respective industries. During the turn of the 19th century, this was the land-owning elite in agriculture, particularly the coffee haciendas. During this time, politics was status-centric with party platforms defined by varying degrees of integration with the metropole. The conservatives advocated for absolute submission to the Spanish, the centrists proposed

[3] Hispanophilia: the cult of all things Spanish or at least with a preference for the Hispanic legacy (Duany 2017, p.121)

autonomous self-governance while remaining under the sovereignty of the metropole, and the liberal sector proposed sovereign independence. Most often, an individual's partisanship depends on their economic aspirations. Tracing the development of insular political parties reveals how the local elite dominate local politics, empowered by favorable policies and violent repression against nationalist-separatist voices. Especially evident during the transition from Spanish to U.S. colonial rule during the first 3 decades of the twentieth century, and the political violence that would continue through the turn of the century. Historically, the interests of the metropole have been protected by the violent repression against nationalist-separatist voices. In the case of Puerto Rico, those political values often align with the ethno-racially marginalized, most often being laborers[4]. Despite the change in dominion at the end of the 19th century, the structure of political parties around status options reflecting the Spanish oligarchy remained. One hundred and twenty-five years later, the centuries-old political party structure remains. In the 2020 gubernatorial elections, the pro-statehood incumbent party still won despite the party's corruption being a salient issue in the months preceding the election. This paper seeks to illustrate the effects of socioeconomic vulnerability on voting against corruption in Puerto Rico while placing the implications of the results in their broader context within the status discourse of the U.S. Congress. Discourse analysis of status bills resulting from the 2020 referendum reveals how corruption is mobilized to invalidate the election results while also justifying economic violence to punish 'the perpetrators' of corruption. In the process, corruption is mobilized by the local elite to maintain control over the colonial civil administration through economic violence. This paper adds to the existing literature by analyzing the role of corruption

[4] It should be mentioned that not all non-white people were laborers, and that in the 19th century there was a considerable elite black and mulatto sector.

in its colonial context, while providing supporting evidence for the need to take different measures to address the status issue of Puerto Rico.

The first section of the paper traces the platforms of the main political parties on the islands from 19th-century Spanish rule through the first century of American dominion, highlighting the relationship between the metropole's influence on economic affairs and the status platform of dominant parties, and the violence that undergirded parties' successes. The following section brings forth a contemporary analysis of election results to illustrate the influence of corruption on voting for vulnerable groups, proposing a mechanism for how corrupt parties maintain dominance over the state apparatus. The third section will bring the implications of the election results at the federal level to light, illuminating how corruption is operationalized as a colonial tool to maintain control over the state apparatus and justify economic violence. The paper then concludes with recommendations for addressing the status issue.

Chapter 1 The Evolution of the Relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S.

The colonial history of Puerto Rico is one of a nation seemingly trapped in purgatory, repeatedly finding itself in a diplomatic and political game of trying to acquire increased autonomy and self-government. The 19th-century relationship between the insular government and the Spanish metropole shares interesting similarities with U.S. dominion despite different economic systems. Notably, political parties defined by 'the status problem' emanate from the colonial relationship with the Spanish metropole and continue to exist today. Non coincidentally, both regimes have yielded similar results for the political reality of Borinkén. The first half-century of U.S. dominion culminated in the Americanization of insular politics and the establishment of the Commonwealth in 1952, realizing a similar political reality to the Autonomous Charter of 1897. A historical materialist analysis of the 19th and 20th centuries illuminates the oligarchic nature of Puerto Rican politics in securing the interests of the economic elite dependent on the metropole. Congruent with the colonial powers on the archipelago is the existence of a politico-juridic-administrative hegemony[5] of an elite class embodied in political parties defined by aspirations for varying degrees of integration with the metropole. In both cases, the nationalist separatist class has been violently repressed and silenced by the state, while the elite class receives subsidies to protect the security and economic interests of the metropole.

19th Century Puerto Rico

Nineteenth-century Puerto Rico was experiencing the back end of the Bourbon Dynasty in Spain that brought military, administrative, and economic restructuring of the Spanish empire

[5] See "Notes on the Puerto Rican Revolution" Gordon K. Lewis 1974

giving greater prominence to the Caribbean and expanding cash crops in Puerto Rico (Duany 2017). The initiative came as an effort to transition the island from a military bastion to an economic asset, a recurring theme in Puerto Rico's colonial history. The early 19th century brought a steady increase in immigrants to the island, many of whom came from neighboring Caribbean islands, as well as Hispaniola and Louisiana following the Haitian Revolution. By the start of the 19th century, free people of color (40.2%) nearly equaled whites (43.3%) (Duany 2017, p.23). Later, *La Real Cédula de Gracias de 1815* opened doors to European capital owners to bolster the sugar industry by inviting Catholics from friendly nations and granting them land free of taxes by royal decree (Luis González 1960). By 1870, "the Island produced about 7% of the world's sugar and had become the second largest exporter of sugar in the Western hemisphere, after Cuba" (Duany 2017, p.29). Agricultural goods like coffee, sugar, and tobacco were the drivers of the economy throughout the 19th century. The immigration boom sparked by the Spanish land grants created a new class of landowning European immigrants who were highly influential on the archipelago and had hegemonic aspirations (Quintero Rivera 1960). Spain's decision to incentivize the immigration of Catholic Europeans into the island by granting them capital critical to the economic interests of the crown, tax-free, has multiple implications. For one, the royal decree just about guaranteed economic prosperity with subsidized capital and favorable economic policy. More importantly, the emphasis on Catholic Europeans realigned the insular culture[6] with the national culture of Spain at a time when the population was increasingly non-European. The immigration encouraged by *La Real Cédula de Gracias de 1815* considerably Europeanized the culture and racial makeup of the Creole elite. However, it did not

[6] For more on the relationship between the Catholic political culture that permeates Latin America, see *The Soul of Latin America: The Cultural and Political Tradition* (2001) by Howard J. Wiarda. Additionally, Anibal Quijano elaborates on the Eurocentrism of not only the economy, but the worldview that was essential to coloniality as an axis of power established during colonialism that continues to exist today.

entirely cancel out the existence of the non-white class, who José Luis González argues were the first to feel the insular territory as their own. Moreover, it was these European immigrants who would be the seed born under political conservatism, whose later generations would be the bearers of liberalism in Puerto Rico (Luis González 1960). Following the whitening of the elite class, the political structure that we see today began to take shape. Berbusse explains:

> "In the Puerto Rico of the 19th century, three political factions began to evolve: the Conservatives, who favored unconditional submission to Spain; the Liberals, who were willing to be assimilated as a province into Spain, but only upon the assurance of a great deal of local administrative autonomy; and the Separatists, who believed that Puerto Rico had arrived at a period of development that would permit them to form a sovereign political unity" (Berbusse 1966, p. 8).

Throughout the last 100 years of Spanish dominion on the Island, Puerto Rico received and lost representation in the Spanish Cortes several times. Over 25 years, Puerto Rico would gain and lose representation within the Cortes 3 times, while only having representation for 7 years (Berbusse 1966). It wasn't until the removal of Isabel II that Puerto Rico would become an official province with representation in the Cortes in 1870, implementing the Bill of Rights of Puerto Rico recognizing human rights (Berbusse 1966). The decade before Isabel II's removal saw two costly wars in 1860 and 1864 that increased taxation on the Caribbean islands and prompted the *Grito de Lares* in 1868. Led by Venezuelan-born Manuel Rojas and organized by exiled physician Ramon Emeterio Betances, separatists seized the town of Lares and declared the independence of Puerto Rico. The organizer of the revolt, Emeterio Betances, came from a racially mixed land-owning family and was educated at the University of Paris while embracing freemasonry in support of liberal reforms. The revolt ultimately failed for four reasons outlined by Jorge Duany:

1. It was hastily organized.
2. The group was ill-equipped and poorly financed.

3. They were ill-experienced to challenge the Spanish troops.

4. Potential sympathizers were ruthlessly persecuted and incarcerated (Duany 2017).

The four-year period of liberal reforms in Spain following Isabel II would end in 1874 with the return to royal absolutism under Alfonso XII, increasing anti-Spanish sentiment on the Island among the nationalist class. While separatists were forced out of the island in the face of violent repression, the Autonomist Party eventually established the Autonomous Charter of 1897 bringing self-government to the Island under Spanish sovereignty. Throughout the 19th century, the insular political culture was heavily dominated by the voices of *peninsulares*[7], and *criollos*[8], whose economic interests were dependent on Spain. The land-owning class determined political culture through the printing press, attempting to establish themselves as the voice of the island while violent repression muted the nationalist sector. Many of them composed the Autonomists Party, including party leader Luis Muñoz Rivera, whose grandfather was a Spanish Officer who fought campaigns in Venezuela, and whose father was the head of the Conservative Party (Maldonado 2006).

An analysis of the insular press at the end of the 19th century illuminates how the Spanish metropole influenced insular politics in conjunction with the use of violence. Critical to politics on the island during the 19th century and into the 20th was the use of the press. José Luis González reveals that national literature was founded in the mid-19th century by the European immigrants who arrived under *La Real Cédula de Gracias de 1815* (Luis González 1960). At the time, there was no true concept of national identity among the elite class, instead, it would become the project of the local elite throughout the century, eventually leading to the national

[7] *Peninsulares* refers to European immigrants living in Puerto Rico, usually of Spanish nationality.
[8] *Criollos* refers to the descendants of the *peninsulares.* Essentially, people born in Puerto Rico who are of European descent.

identity crisis in the 1930s (Quintero Rivera 1960). Despite their efforts framing their interests around *La gran familia puertorriqueña* as a concept that allowed the elite class to represent their interest as that of the general country, they failed at creating national cohesion (Quintero Rivera 1960). Largely in part because they excluded the large nationalist, black and mulatto sectors in their images of national identity. The 19th-century politics of Puerto Rico were dominated by the European immigrants and their later generations who got their footing from a land grant from the Spanish crown, and amplified their power by dominating politics and media by violently suppressing nationalist voices.

1898 - 1950: Solidifying U.S. Power

Less than a year after the Spanish Prime Minister signed the Autonomous Charter at the end of 1897, the United States began its bombardment of the capital. Five weeks after the initial bombardment in May of 1898, the U.S. invaded Puerto Rico through the southern town of Guánica, marking the beginning of U.S. occupation on the island and the end of the insular government's short-lived autonomy with Spain. The general sentiment on the island during the U.S. invasion is described as one of hope with latent concerns. Hope that the new liberal nation would bring their ideals with them, and concerns their relationship with a new metropole would have the same colonial tinge they had just escaped. Maldonado describes the island as welcoming the invaders and them being seen as liberators from the clerical influences of the Catholic church. He quotes the proclamation General Miles made "days after landing in Guánica… in the city of Ponce:

> 'We have not come to make war upon the people of a country that for centuries had been oppressed, but, on the contrary, to bring you the protection, not only to yourselves but to your property, and to bestow upon you the immunities and blessings of the liberal

> institutions of our government … the advantages and blessings of enlightened civilization'" (Maldonado 2006).

Meanwhile, Denis describes the farmers as having the same fatalism with which they accepted hurricanes (Denis 2015). Despite these narratives of welcoming the American invaders, the insular political elite reverberated their adamant pro-Spanish stance leading up to and after the invasion. Days before the invasion, Luis Muñoz Rivera, Secretary of Government and leader of the Autonomist Party, "categorically declared Puerto Rico's loyalty," proclaiming "'We are Spaniards and wrapped in the Spanish flag will we die'' (Berbusse 1966, p.64). Moreover, *La Democracia*, a highly influential newspaper owned by Muñoz Rivera, concluded "'If the United States would bring war to Puerto Rico, I am sure that Puerto Ricans would defend themselves to the death, shedding their blood in the defense of Spain'" in an editorial written by Mariano Abril (Berbusse 1966, p.67). Revealing the proud Spanish nationality of the insular elite at the time of the U.S. invasion.

During the transition period of the initial decades of U.S. occupation of the archipelago, the expression of nationality among the elite class aligned with Spain, contradicting the attempts to embody a Puerto Rican national identity in media. In the case of Puerto Rico, Ángel G. Quintero Rivera notes that the class that managed the initial nationalist fight at the end of the 19th century was not a national elite, but a highly contradictory nobility producing merchandise for exportation (Quintero Rivera 1960). This reality of a local elite with economic interest dependent on the metropole would culminate in the national identity crisis following U.S. occupation and the pro-Spanish conservative backlash from the elite class on the island, revealing their Spanish nationality despite trying to form an insular national identity. Moreover, the existence of a local elite with interests based in a foreign nation plays a critical role in the

underdevelopment of the local economy and the insular economic conditions that made the independence aspirations increasingly idealistic.

Shortly after the U.S. invasion, Hurricane San Ciriaco swept over the island and caused widespread destruction and loss of life, deepening the existing poverty on the island. The hurricane effectively destroyed 90% of the coffee bean crop for the year (Denis 2015), resulting in a catastrophic hit to the Island's economy. Shortly after the U.S. declared the Island's peso worth 60% of the USD at a time when it was nearly equal to the dollar, stripping nearly 40% of savings overnight. Before the insular elite could recuperate, the U.S. passed the Hollander Bill of 1901, which included a land tax that forced small farmers to mortgage their lands with U.S. banks at high interest rates, forcing defaults within the decade. Moreover, the Hollander Bill provided tariff exemption on sugar imports from Puerto Rico, while imposing direct tax on real and personal property, and continued to levy excise taxes on liquor and tobacco. This form of tax imperialism[9] caused local landholding elites to lose power and facilitated the dominance of sugar trusts while accelerating proletarianization (Fuste 2017). The result was the transformation of the island into a sugar plantation (Denis 2015). "By 1934, every sugar cane farm in Puerto Rico belonged to one of forty-one syndicates, 80 percent of which were U.S. owned; the four largest syndicates…were entirely U.S. owned and covered over half the island's arable land" (Denis 2015, p.30). By the 1930s, Puerto Rico had completed its transition to a dependent capitalist economy dominated by American interests marking the complete agrarian transformation into a typical sugar island, "characterized by the extreme concentration of land and capital, the predominance of capitalist relations of production, the lack of internal economic diversification, the production of primary commodity for a single external market, and the import of most basic

[9] Referenced from José Fusté, tax imperialism refers to the implementation of legal and policy instruments aimed at protecting U.S. industries while driving local producers out of business.

goods from the metropole" (Duany 2015, p.49). During the initial decades of U.S. dominion, the insular economy saw GDP growth; however also amassed greater inequality as the majority of sugar profits were leaving the island for the mainland. As expected, the dominant political parties would become increasingly pro-American with the consolidation of the newly implanted elite's economic power.

In the first two years of U.S. occupation, the insular government was run by the military. "In the absence of instructions, it was regarded as the duty of the military governor to use the means preparatory to a territorial regime" (Berbusse 1966, p.80). During this time, the military governance used its authority to change laws and restructure the insular government. Apparent in the insular press during this period was the growing disillusionment with the Americans, shown by the media's increasing criticism of the United States. Moreover, the economic situation during the military governorship was disastrous. Poverty, famine, and illness were rampant on the island following the hurricane. The last U.S. military governor of Puerto Rico, General Davis, "was strongly convinced that the island was not prepared for self-government" pointing to the likelihood of the masses being "'manipulated and controlled and corrupted by the political bosses, just as they were accustomed to being by their former masters'" (Berbusse 1966, p.105). Marking the beginning of corruption narratives justifying U.S. dominion and economic violence. The Foraker Act of 1900, the first organic act, established the legal framework for civil government in Puerto Rico under U.S tutelage. The act made clear that Puerto Rico was an overseas possession subject to the plenary power of the U.S. Congress as an unincorporated territory, but did not commit Congress to extend either independence or statehood. It also established a highly centralized administration structure with members appointed by the U.S. president. A key provision of the act established free trade between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, but

required merchandise to be carried by the U.S. Merchant Marine (Duany 2017). Ricardo Arturo Cruz García illuminates the shortcomings of this overextended temporary act lasting nearly two decades while providing less than what was obtained under Spanish sovereignty, and certainly less than what was proclaimed by General Miles in Ponce (Cruz García 2009). By March of 1917, the Foraker Act was revised in the form of the Jones Act providing Puerto Ricans with the option to accept U.S. citizenship, granting Puerto Rico a Bill of Rights, authorizing the election of the Island's resident commissioner previously appointed by the U.S. president, and replaced the executive council with an elected bicameral legislature. A month after conferring citizenship to Puerto Rico, the United States entered WWI (Duany 2017) and included the new U.S. citizens on the island as a part of the Selective Service. The bill passed with support from the Republican and Socialist parties despite opposition from the Unionist Party, an offshoot of the Autonomist Party under Spanish rule, and without a plebiscite giving voice to the people on the island. To emphasize the connection between the consolidation of the dependent capitalist economy and the restructuring of the insular government, Denis reveals the opportunist nature of the businessmen who were governors following the implementation of a civilian government on the island. The first civilian governor, Charles Herbert Allen, "used his brief tenure to become King of Sugar" (Denis 2015, p.29). Following his tenure as governor, Allen worked in Wall Street as the VP of Morgan Trust Company and Guaranty Trust Company while "his hundreds of political appointees in Puerto Rico provided him with land grants, tax subsidies, water rights, railroad easements, foreclosure sales, and favorable tariffs" (Denis 2015, p.58). Denis further emphasizes the running of the Puerto Rican government as an American sugar corporation in the appointment of businessmen who have conflicts of interest in political offices within the insular government. "In 1926, President Calvin Coolidge appointed Frederick G. Holcomb, auditor for

the United Fruit Company, as the auditor of the entire island of Puerto Rico" (Denis 2015, p.29). During this time the American regime mounted an insular campaign with significant education reform attacking the education system by trying to force English as the primary language of instruction. The education campaign was the main front in the attempts to Americanize the island's population, directly confronting the Catholic Church. During the 19th century, the clerical influence dominated education and served as the remaining connection between the island and the Spanish metropole. Replacing their role in education quickly became the target of U.S. interest in transitioning the island. What becomes increasingly notable is that the conditions preventing self-government, illustrated in General Davis's assessment of the Island's politics, were not the corrupt elections but the loyalties to Spain. In the first three decades of U.S. dominion, the Americans employed corruption[10] and violence to seize control of the means of capital accumulation and the civil administration.

The three main parties following the implementation of a civilian government were the pro-statehood Republican Party, the pro-self-government Unionist Party, and the proletarian Socialist Party, which was more ideologically driven than based on a status preference and emerged as a result of the implementation of capitalism. The party representing the interests of the elite class under Spanish rule was the Unionist Party. During the initial years of U.S.

[10] Some notes about corruption: Corruption is a slippery and evolving topic with ethical implications that make it increasingly difficult to establish a shared conceptualization of its boundaries. In this paper, my conceptualization of corruption adopts many of the considerations presented by James Scott in *Comparative Political Corruption (1972)*. Scott calls readers to consider the political and social structures of a society when considering the boundaries of corruption. In doing so, Scott does not limit the bounds of corruption to the public sector. Instead, he recognizes its transactional relationship with the private sector, while also contextualizing corruption within "the distribution of power in society and the character of regime institutions" (Scott 1972, p. 6).
Taking this into consideration, the remainder of this section contextualizes the distribution of power in Puerto Rico and the significance of party structure as a tool for the expression of power by the insular elite, given the archipelago's relationship with the metropole.
For general purposes, we may adopt Nye's definition of corruption provided in James Scott's (1972) book to understand corruption as "behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role (elective or appointive) because of private-regarding wealth or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence [Nye, 1967, p.416]" (Scott 1972, p.4).

occupation, factions of the Unionist Party embraced independence and increased self-government under U.S. sovereignty. The ideological split in the party came between party leaders Luis Muñoz Rivera, who was pro-autonomy, and José de Diego, who was pro-sovereignty. Leading up to the passing of the Jones Act of 1920, the Unionist party remained opposed to the inclusion of U.S. citizenship in the bill and sought revisions that would include greater Puerto Rican autonomy. Factions led by José de Diego would argue in favor of a quick resolution in the form of independence, but were silenced during the 1915 party convention, which made independence an issue to be considered at a later date. Independence would remain in the party platform until the Reilly administration, coinciding with the governor's vigorously pro-Americanization attitude (Cruz García 2009). Governor Reilly is touted as being the most hardline governor in the Americanization of Puerto Rico. During his inaugural speech in 1921, Governor Reilly "pledged to fire anyone who lacked 'Americanism'" (Denis 2015) and actively sought to remove *independentistas* from the government. At the forefront of his Americanization campaign was challenging the Catholic Church by implementing an English-American education in the school curriculum. Reilly's governorship was plagued by corruption to the disdain of Puerto Ricans. Almost a year into his appointment on April 7, 1922, "a grand jury in San Juan brought formal charges of 'misuse of public funds for private purposes' against Governor Reilly, his secretary John Hull, and auditor, William Kissinger" leading to the police forcibly ejecting San Juan District Attorney Ramón Díaz Collazo by order of Governor Reilly, and the attempted firing of Puerto Rican attorney general, Salvador Mestre (Denis 2015). Governor Reilly's radical Americanism and corruption provoked militant support for independence and the splintering of the Unionist Party *independentistas* into the Nationalist Party in the 1930s (Maldonado 2006). During a time when Puerto Rican secession symbolized a dangerous cry of rebellion to the

Americans and threatened their interests in maintaining control in the Antilles (Cruz Gacía 2009). The splintering of the Unionist party is evidence of the consolidation of U.S. power on the island and represents the successful Americanization of the key opposition party. With their economic influence pulled out from underneath them and the solidification of the U.S.-dependent capitalist economy, the insular elite were forced to either adopt Americanization or continue the fight for independence without financial backing. The following decades would be littered with human rights violations and amassed violence to silence pro-independence voices.

After the annexation, the insular elite class switched their strategy in securing their political ambitions from an offensive stance against a weaker Spanish metropole to a defensive stance against the U.S. With the imposition of a new colonial capitalist economic system the land-owning class rooted in immigration from *La Real Cédula de Gracias de 1815* were challenged by the new resident anti-national elite[11]. In response, the challenged 'native elite,' the *hacendados*[12], took a conservative, reactionary position oriented around the conservation of the social hegemony of the economy, politics, and culture, creating a sensation of uncertainty and insecurity. Moreover, this class attempted to consolidate their conceptualization of a national identity in the image of the *jíbaro*[13] projected in the national literature; however barely reflected the existence of a significant black population of the island and was therefore unable to project their conception of Puerto Rican identity to ample sectors of the country. Instead, the image of the *jíbaro* in the national literature reflected the Creole elite (Luis González 1960). The effects of the economic transition also presented an additional challenge for the *hacendados* in the

[11] The anti-national elite refers to the group empowered by the U.S. tax imperialist policies, whose economic interests are inherently tied to the American metropole.
[12] *Hacendados* is a reference from Quintero Rivera that refers to the European land-owning elite, who secured their economic power from the Spanish land grant in the early 19th century. See Quintero Rivera 1960.
[13] *Jibaro* refers to the national image of the Puerto Rican, depicted as a farmer or peasant, from the interior of the island, associated with the traditional self-subsistent way of life.

formation of a new proletariat whose interests were represented by labor organizations and the Socialist Party. The labor organizations developed a universal concept of *patria*[14] grounded in Marxist theory and internationalism, contradictory to that produced by the *hacendados*. Moreover, the newly formed proletariat supported U.S. capitalism, opting to pursue their aspirations through the channels of liberal democracy, rather than independence. During the late 1920s, the Socialist Party gained significant power (Meléndez-Badillo 2024). Antagonism between the economic elite present during Spanish rule and the laborers is evident in the national literature, which had profound racial implications with implicit and explicit racism during the 20th century (Luis González 1960). The elite antagonisms and insular infighting along class and racial cleavages benefited the U.S. by preventing a cohesive liberation movement in the face of the Americanization of the Puerto Rican economy and politics during the 1920s and 1930s.

Following the radical Americanism of the Wall Street governors, the Nationalist Party began to have a militaristic tinge and established the Cadets of the Republic, the critically underfunded national liberation army composed largely of sugar cane laborers. Although "the cadets posed no danger to the U.S. regime… they did represent a symbolic threat – and so, until the mid-twentieth century, many were shot and killed in police stations and at Palm Sunday parades, in town squares and dark alleys, in broad daylight and at dawn" (Denis 2015, p.39). A commonality between the colonial regimes of the Spanish and the U.S. is the use of extreme violence to ensure the protection of economic interests. Though only garnering 2 percent of the vote in the 1932 election, the Nationalist Party successfully exercised influence through organized labor strikes. In January 1934, they lead an "agricultural strike that paralyzed the island's sugar economy for a full month and doubled workers' wages…from that moment

[14] *Patria* is similar to one's native homeland, or country.

forward, the party was under a severe microscope. The FBI initiated round-the-clock surveillance of the Nationalist leadership" (Denis 2015, p.14). During this time, the appointed governor, Robert H. Gore, was known for his feverish paranoia against anyone who was not pro-American and his anarchic six-month appointment. Immediately after his resignation in 1934, President Roosevelt appointed General Blanton Winship to restore law and order. The move represented the Island returning to its former militaristic rule. During General Winship's governorship, the entire island was militarized, and violence escalated. A year into his governorship, "police shot and killed four Nationalists (including the party's treasurer, Ramón Pagán) in what became known as the Río Piedras Massacre" on October 24, 1935 (Denis 2015, p.43). Four months later, two Nationalists retaliated, assassinating Police Chief Riggs, who was the heir to the Riggs National Bank[15], leading to the arrest of party leader Pedro Albizu Campos. The two men were then arrested and executed promptly. Afterward, "General Winship took immediate personal command of the Insular police" (Denis 2015, p.67). A few months later, the Insular police gunned down seventeen men, women, and children on Palm Sunday, under orders of Police Chief Enrique de Orbeta, who reported directly to Governor Winship during the Ponce Massacre. A third-party investigation done by the American Civil Liberties Union, led by Arthur Garfield Hays, found:

> "1. The facts showed that the affair of March 21 in Ponce was a 'MASSACRE' (caps theirs).
> 2. Civil liberties had been repeatedly denied during the previous nine months by order of Governor Blanton Winship, who failed to recognize the rights of free speech and assembly and threatened the use of force against those who would exercise those rights.
> 3. The Ponce Massacre arose out of the denial by the police of the civil right of citizens to parade and assemble, a denial ordered by the governor of Puerto Rico" (Denis 2015, p.53).

[15] The Riggs National Bank is a prominent financial institution with connections to powerful people in Washington, D.C.

The violence, police raids and arrests, and the disappearance of nationalists defined General Winship's governorship. Following his tenure, Winship would become a lobbyist for U.S. corporations and sugar syndicates that owned the economy of Puerto Rico (Denis 2015).

By 1938, the son of political giant Luis Muñoz Rivera, Luis Muñoz Marin, established the Popular Democratic Party after leaving the Liberal Party, a pro-independence offshoot from the Unionist Party established after the alliance between the Unionist Party and the Republican Party. Despite being originally unified under the common umbrella of pro-independence, Muñoz Marin based his campaigns on economic policy while avoiding the status issue. With his newspaper, *El Batey,* the party was able to overcome the fear of violence against *independentistas* held among the peasantry, winning their vote. In 1940, Muñoz Marin was elected the President of the Puerto Rican Senate, and in 1948 would be the first democratically elected governor of Puerto Rico. Although initially supporting independence, Muñoz Marin opposed multiple independence bills introduced in Congress throughout the 1940s for economic reasons (Maldonado 2006). Fearing the independence bills were attempts to allow Puerto Rico to walk free, only to shoot them in the back, leaving the people on the island to starve. Instead, Muñoz-Marin sought economic refuge through favorable trade with the U.S. The solidification of U.S. control in Puerto Rican politics would be evident when Muñoz Marin “convened an emergency legislative session to pass Public Law 53 (Gag Law)” (Denis 2015, p.104) making it illegal to own or display a Puerto Rican flag, to speak or write of independence, or to assemble in favor of Puerto Rican independence a year after Albizu Campos’s return to the island in 1947. The Gag Law would corner Albizu Campos and the Nationalists, forcing their hand. In 1950, they would launch a revolt which would be quickly suppressed with extreme violence, during which the U.S. bombed its own citizens in the towns of Jayuya and Utuado for the first and only

time in U.S. history. During the revolt, Nationalists also attempted to assassinate the then-governor, Muñoz Marin. Unsuccessful, they were shot dead on the street in front of *La Fortaleza*, the governor's home in San Juan (Denis 2015). By 1952, Muñoz Marin would have the only successful status bill establishing the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, granting the Island greater autonomy under U.S. sovereignty. Despite increased autonomy through the insular constitution, Puerto Rico remained an unincorporated territory under the plenary power of the U.S. Constitution. All regulations and articles of the federal laws that ruled relations between Puerto Rico and the U.S. since the 1898 Treaty of Paris remained intact (Duany 2017). Following the use of violence in liberation efforts, Muñoz Marin moved away from independence completely and declared the Commonwealth the permanent status of Puerto Rico, despite its original conception as a transitional status. Concurrent with his shift away from the pursuit of independence was the launch of "Operation Bootstrap," an industrialization effort that deepened Puerto Rico's dependence on the U.S. metropole.

The Back End of the 20th Century: Operation Bootstrap

Following the consolidation of American dominion with the absolute suppression of nationalist voices, American colonial dominance sank its teeth deeper through economic reform. Officially commenced in 1947, Operation Bootstrap, led by the general manager of the Puerto Rico Industrial Development Company, José Teodoro Moscoso, can be traced to failing ventures from a few years earlier. Four of the five early ventures of PRIDCO failed, however, the heavy profits of the Puerto Rico Cement Company substantially made up for the losses of the remaining four subsidiaries. Following the reorientation in 1947, Moscoso launched a marketing campaign to attract capital from the U.S. metropole. Backed by the Puerto Rican legislature, Moscoso and Muñoz Marin collaborated to pass the Industrial Tax-Exemption Acts, Act No. 346

of 1947 and Act No. 184 of 1948, establishing a 12-year period during which the existing and newly established firms from the U.S. were to operate free from individual, corporate, and partnership incomes; municipal and central government taxes levied on the property used by an exempted firm and on property leased to such a firm; and local levies, license fees and excises. Additional legislation included exemption from insular excise taxes on machinery, apparatus, raw material used by them, and on goods transferred from one manufacturer to another or an agent for shipment outside of the island. Smaller taxes and fees remained nonexempt, like investment income, interest payments accrued on loans made to exempted firms, federal social security, workmen's compensation premiums, fees on motor vehicles, and *ad valorem* excise taxes on luxury products like cigarettes and radios. "Under Puerto Rico's tax benefits, the owner's profits would be catapulted by 206 percent" (Bhana 1975). At the heart of Operation Bootstrap, tax incentives that allowed U.S. corporations to repatriate the majority of profits to the mainland served as the largest incentive for their existence in Puerto Rico. As a result, legislation providing another ten years of tax exemption was passed in 1954. Through the first two decades, the archipelago saw significant growth in employment, GDP, and population. Because the population grew significantly during this period, and because job creation was mitigated by workers transferring from agriculture to manufacturing, unemployment was unable to drop from its high of 17.9 percent in 1940 to below 11 percent until 1964 (Bhana 1975). As a result, a state-sponsored mass migration began in the 1950s, relocating Puerto Rican workers throughout the U.S. Despite the economic program improving metrics for economic growth, the insular government continued to rely on bonds to pay for infrastructure in the mid-1950s. Moreover, the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, which banned foreign-flagged ships from carrying cargo between Puerto Rico and U.S. ports, undermined Puerto Rico's potential to diversify the economy by

becoming a transshipment hub (Fuste 2017). As a result of the reliance on a model of export-led industrialization dependent on foreign capital, the economy would eventually falter during the recession in the U.S., catalyzed by the 1973 Oil Crisis. Through the first two decades of Operation Bootstrap, the PDP maintained electoral dominance while deepening the island's economic dependence on the U.S. Because of the tax incentives and trade arrangements with the metropole, the economic program did not establish an internal market. Instead, profits continued to leave the island for the metropole while Puerto Rico imported most of its products from the U.S. and exported most of the insular goods to the 'mainland' (Bhana 1975). Muñoz Marin's politics during the 1940s successfully sewed together the interests of the insular elite, the peasantry, and U.S. investors in a plan that unified the local elite under the umbrella of independence in a party advertising a contradictory narrative to the peasantry, while allowing U.S. corporations to double their profits tax-free. Meanwhile, the first two decades following the establishment of the Commonwealth saw continued repression of independence voices and the continued dilution of diverse political ideas into three political parties.

Discontent with party leader Muñoz Marin's shift away from independence, a faction of the PPD and the Nationalist Party established the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) in 1946. Electorally, the PIP would be the main party representing independence on the island and remained committed to pursuing this end through the electoral process. However, they would never garner substantial votes through the Cold War period. Following WWII, establishing the Commonwealth allowed the U.S. to take Puerto Rico off the U.N.'s list of colonies, aligning with their international anticolonial image while serving to incentivize acquiescence among the islands' inhabitants (Fuste 2017). Despite bringing change, Commonwealth status was a veneer designed to serve the interests of the metropole. José Carlos Arroyo Muñoz describes the

political arrangement in the 1960s as a colonial state locally administered by the elite, who competed for support to later impose their public policy and to defend their interests before the metropole. Arguing that the political parties operate within a government designed to be determined by parties who receive a fraction of the vote, with a metropole that creates a monolithic superstructure designed to protect its powers. He describes this relationship with the U.S. as the justification of the status quo, the persecution of *independistas* and reformists, and the incorporation of the Puerto Rican economy into the U.S. economy. Through the Cold War era, independence efforts began to take the form of armed guerrilla movements inspired by the success of the Cuban revolutionaries. From 1960 to 1990, "there were at least 303 acts of terrorism perpetuated by Cuban exiles and other right-wing organizations in Puerto Rico". In response, "there were politically oriented assassinations, bombings, and indiscriminate arrests throughout the decade. The police and the FBI also expanded their efforts and successfully infiltrated several leftist organizations" (Meléndez-Badillo 2024, p.128). Campaigns against the *independistas* included:

1. Utilizing civil groups, la AUPE, la Legión Americana, and others as instruments in their campaign to discredit the *independentistas.*
2. The radicalization of the counterinsurgency campaign of the intelligence sector of the local police incorporated tactics like fiscal control and included checking cars, offices, and residents of suspects.
3. The use of civilians and police or a combination of both in the creation and infiltration of groups to destroy the Marxists. A method taught by the School of Americas.
4. The use of false propaganda and communication methods to the masses, like propaganda instruments for the federal intelligence agencies inserting defaming articles in the press.
5. Direct intervention in local politics through the operation of defamation campaigns against the independence movement and the autonomist sector in the plebiscite of 1967 and the 1968 elections. COINTELPRO the FBI op and Task Force 157 by the office of Naval Intelligence (Arroyo Muñoz 2002).

Political violence would continue to be a prevalent tool for protecting U.S. interests and silencing independence and reformist voices through the end of the 20th century and into the first decade of the 21st century. These groups took to methods outside of electoral politics in pursuit of their aspirations, while the PIP garnered a slim margin of the votes for several decades. Meanwhile, Puerto Rican politics was consumed by the PDP and NPP as the diverse political landscape continued to be diluted into the same party structures present during the 19th-century Spanish dominion.

Conclusion

The party system of the 19th century reflected the Spanish oligarchy at the time. Dominated by the landowning European class sponsored by the Spanish royal decree, the parties were born under an oligarchic voting system where the decision of who votes and how they vote was unilaterally decided by Spain (Arroyo Muñoz 2002). More than 125 years after the possession of the archipelago was transferred to the United States, the parties continue to be primarily defined by their respective positions about the nature of the relationship with the metropole. Noncoincidentally, the insular government has produced similar political realities of limited autonomy under a metropole that creates a monolithic superstructure designed to protect its interests. Evident during the transition period from Spanish to American colonial rule is the oligarchic nature of insular politics on the island, dominated by the economic elite whose interests are tied to the metropole. Despite attempting to establish an insular national identity in their image, the elite class undoubtedly proclaimed their Spanish nationality in the face of an American threat. During the first three decades of U.S. dominion, the progressive shift away from independence from the European landowning class during the final century of Spanish rule coincided with their loss of economic strength and the consolidation of U.S. sugar corporations.

By the time the interests of the insular oligarchy were notably dependent on the U.S. metropole, the threat of economic violence in the form of cutting off the supply of capital and essential commodities, like food, was sufficient in persuading once pro-independence factions into deepening ties with the U.S. metropole. The result of which was the establishment of a political status that served as a smokescreen to the archipelago's colonial relationship with the U.S., paired with an industrialization project that deepened Puerto Rico's dependence on the metropole's economy by creating tax incentives allowing for the repatriation of profits to the U.S. All while importing most goods from the U.S and exporting most insular commodities. The failure to establish an internal market left Puerto Rico vulnerable to the global economy, evident in the massive recession during the 1973 Oil Crisis. Even during the relative 'boom' created by industrialization, Puerto Rico's government continued to rely heavily on bonds to support itself. As Puerto Rico's economic dependence on the U.S. deepened through the latter half of the 20th century, the bipartisan hegemony[16] of the parties reliant on integration with the metropole deepened their control over insular politics. Aided by the violent repression of independence voices, the pro-statehood and pro-autonomy parties maintained their dominance while enlisting economic policies that exacerbated conditions of socioeconomic vulnerability among the masses and repeatedly recycled administrations littered with corruption. Because of their party platform promising political reality they have no power to provide, the bipartisan hegemony has been able to continue reproducing corrupt administrations while the masses keep their votes between the two parties because of their association with a future political reality tied to the illusion of economic security through welfare. Welfare that many become dependent on, and whose dependency continues to be exacerbated by the misuse of public funds and the austerity measures

[16] Bipartisan hegemony refers to the dominant two parties, the pro-statehood New Progressive Party and the pro-autonomy Popular Democratic Party, that dominated Puerto Rican politics for nearly a century.

of the bipartisan hegemony. In this way, the party structure defined by resolving the ‘status issue’ is an emanation of coloniality rooted in Spanish colonialism, upheld by corruption, and serving the economic interests of the oligarchy.

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Chapter 2 : Corruption Voting in Puerto Rico

Over the last 70 years, the bipartisan hegemony has exacerbated conditions of socioeconomic vulnerability[17] through corruption and neoliberal economic policies, accumulating insurmountable amounts of debt while cutting funding for health, education, and other public services. In the process, they have deepened the population's dependence on social welfare and the U.S. job market while creating more obstacles to the realization of their proposed political reality. Effectively solidifying their constituency's reliance on the economic realities promised by their political platforms, while making it an increasingly distant reality. In the process, these parties have been able to avoid effective corruption sanctioning votes[18]. Instead, voters keep their votes within the bipartisan hegemony to maintain access to clientelist resources, future welfare funding, and U.S. citizenship. The 2020 election is ripe with evidence suggesting vulnerable voters are more likely to cast corruption-sanctioning votes within the dominant two-party system.

The History of the Bipartisan Hegemony:

As the economy began to show signs of faltering at the end of the 60s, so did the dominance of the PDP. Established by a faction of the Republican Party in 1967 (Arroyo Muñoz 2002), the pro-statehood New Progressive Party won its first gubernatorial election in 1968 with the election of Luis A. Ferré. From this point on, the PDP and NPP would dominate Puerto Rican politics for half a century in a bipartisan hegemony while relying heavily on bonds to support the economy. The end of the 20th century began showing signs of a deepening financial crisis as

[17] In this paper, I adopt the same definition of vulnerability as in the Tormos-Aponte et al study, referring to it as "a population's exposure to risk, loss, and harm, and the attributes of that population shape the negative impacts from a disaster as well as its resilience" (Tormos-Aponte et al 2021, p. 2).
[18] Corruption sanctioning votes are votes cast to punish corrupt parties by voting for the opposition.

Section 936 of the Internal Revenue Code began to phase out in 1996, during Governor Pedro Rosselló's (NPP) administration (1993-2001) to put the territory on equal footing with the states. During his governorship, Rosselló wanted to focus on social problems like economic distress, rampant crime, and political corruption. Instead, his administration privatized many public sectors and set the stage for 40 percent of the companies that benefited from the local tax exemption to leave after 2006, resulting in the loss of nearly 70 thousand jobs between 2009 and 2015. To address crime, the Rosselló administration declared a war on crime, initiating full-scale military raids and occupation of *caserios*[19]. Moreover, his administration was plagued by scandals and corruption. "More than eighty people from or close to the Rosselló administration were either accused of, convicted on, or imprisoned on corruption charges" (Meléndez-Badillo 2024, p.161). Rosselló's administration is evidence of the NPP's strategy of appealing to the masses while also advancing a neoliberal agenda (Meléndez-Badillo 2024) and the continued use of corruption and violence to secure control over the civil administration. After Rosselló's NPP administration, the next two governors would be from the PDP. Notably, during Governor Anibal Acevedo Vilá's campaign for reelection in 2008, he was charged with "twenty-four federal counts of corruption. It came as no surprise that his contender from the NPP, Puerto Rico's Resident Commissioner in Washington Luis G. Fortuño, won the ticket by the biggest margin in the country's electoral history – 224,894 votes" (Meléndez-Badillo 2024, pp. 166-167), following the pattern of voters responding to corruption by voting for the opposition party within the dominant two-party system. Shortly after his election, he organized the Consejo Asesor de Reconstrucción Económica y Fiscal (Fiscal and Economic Reconstruction Advising Committee; CAREF), composed of bankers and businesspeople, to operate as Puerto Rico's

[19] *Caserios* are low-income neighborhoods

colonial administrators. As expected, CAREF recommended an austerity package, including massive layoffs, freezing collective bargaining agreements, and eliminating other workers' rights" (Meléndez-Badillo 2024, pp. 166-167). Moreover, during his administration, Fortuño accrued $11 billion in debt and aligned the NPP with the most conservative factions within the U.S. Republican Party, the party that poses the main opposition to ending the colonial status quo in the U.S. Congress. The administrations of the bipartisan hegemony in the last two decades have deepened the archipelago's dependence on the U.S. federal funding while creating blockades to resolve the status issue through corruption and neoliberal economic policies, amassing debts, and contributing to the economic violence of the working population in Puerto Rico.

By 2014, the debt reached unprecedented levels, and for the first time, the then-governor, Alejandro García Padilla, announced that the island government would not be able to pay the debt in 2015 (Meléndez-Badillo 2024). The insular financial crisis led to the passing of the Republican-conceived PROMESA[20] bill in 2016, placing insular fiscal autonomy in the hands of an appointed Financial Oversight Management Board. PROMESA and the Supreme Court case *Puerto Rico v. Sánchez Valle* reiterated Puerto Rico's position as an unincorporated territory subject to the plenary power of the U.S. Congress. Immediately, the FOMB began approving budget cuts for social services proposed by the Rosselló administration. Elected in 2016, Ricardo 'Ricky' Rosselló, the son of Pedro Rosselló, immediately declared a financial emergency, allowing for unpopular economic policies to pass through executive orders. During his administration, budget cuts drastically reduced funding for health services, education, and other public services. Education was especially targeted for budget cuts, resulting in the closing of

[20] The Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Stability Act

hundreds of schools and a drastic reduction in funding for the university system. The austerity measures of the Rosselló administration resulted in widespread protests and student strikes. Moreover, in the next 4 years, the archipelago would be devastated by two category 5 hurricanes, hundreds of earthquakes, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of which can hardly be put into words, especially as botched recovery efforts and delayed federal funds exacerbated it. Rosello's administration would end in 2019 as mass protests demanded his resignation following a corruption scandal during the Summer of 2019, an event revealing a population at its breaking point. Despite the historic event fighting against corruption, the summer before the election year, the incumbent party remained in office for two more election cycles. This creates an interesting case study to analyze where corruption-sanctioning votes are being placed in colonial contexts. I argue that as the corruption and austerity measures of the bipartisan hegemony exacerbate conditions of socioeconomic vulnerability, voters sanction the corrupt incumbent by voting for the opposing candidate within the bipartisan hegemony because they share party platforms that rely heavily on access to critical resources, as evident in the 2020 gubernatorial elections. The result is unpunished corrupt politicians using the same avenues of exploitation that were used by the Spanish oligarchy in the 19th century.

Elections in Puerto Rico:

Over the last half-century, no other parties other than the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (NPP), and the pro-Commonwealth Popular Democratic Party (PDP) have garnered enough votes to present themselves as a legitimate option. Without the presence of a powerful

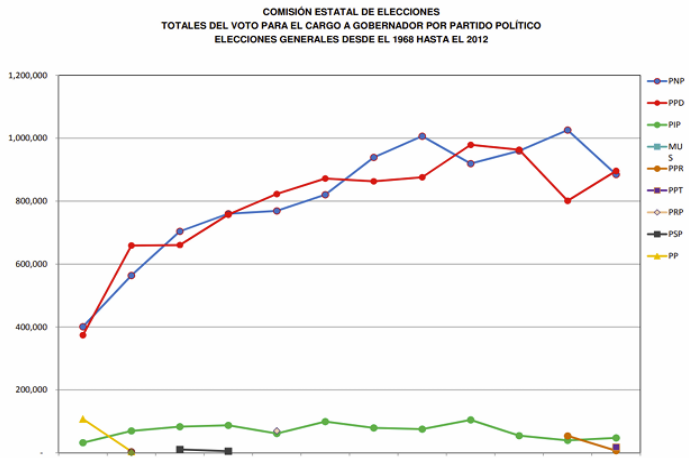

Figure 1: 'Total votes for the Governor position by political party in general elections from 1968 to 2012'.

Graph obtained from the Puerto Rico State Elections Commission (Comisión Estatal de Elecciones) website, March 2024. (https://ww2.ceepur.org/Home/Estadisticas).

political actor or group that stands to gain from the control of corruption, anticorruption reforms fail (Gans-Morse 2018). Therefore, because Puerto Rican political parties are structured as an avenue where voters can express their desired political status, corruption is easily unpunished by vulnerable voters who are forced to prioritize status in the absence of an anti-corruption party. The bipartisan hegemony presents itself as the safest option by ensuring continued access to critical resources, especially since independence has been historically associated with violence.

In the past two general elections in 2016 and 2020, Puerto Rico has seen a significant decrease in electoral turnout to its lowest in Commonwealth history at around 55% (State Election Commission). Literature on corruption voting suggests that increased perceptions of corruption result in decreased voter turnout (Stockemer et al. 2012; Chong et al 2015). Once corruption reaches a certain level, the challenger is believed to be potentially tainted by an environment that is seen as thoroughly corrupt, potentially explaining why voters disengage from politics when confronted with political corruption (Chong et al 2015, p.67). Despite corruption

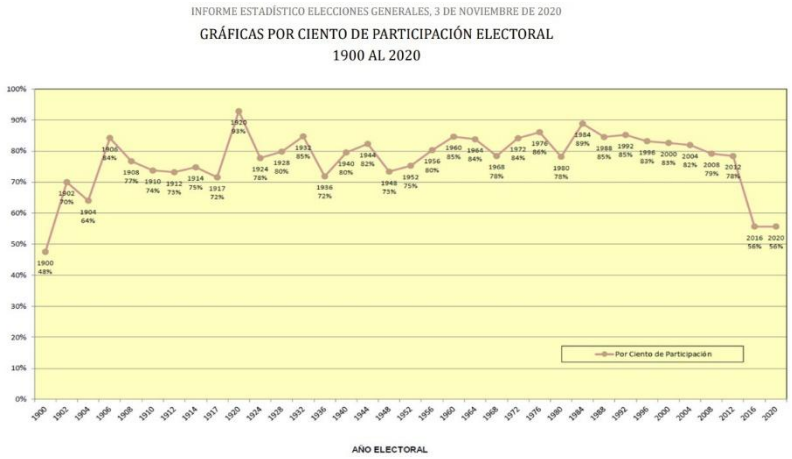

Figure 2: "State Election Commission Election Participation Percent 1900 to 2020"

Graph obtained from the Puerto Rico State Elections Commission (Comisión Estatal de Elecciones) website March 2024. (https://ww2.ceepur.org/Home/Estadisticas).

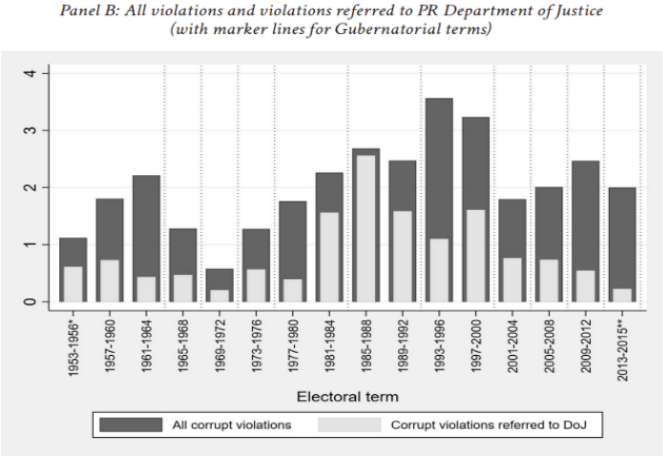

Figure 3: Graph shows the average number of violations per report from the Office of Comptroller of Puerto Rico (OCPR) in each electoral term. *The latest publication year of reports is 2015, therefore their data does not include all reports in the 2013-2016 electoral term.

Graph obtained from Bobonis, Gustavo J., et al. "Development and Decay: Political Organization and Municipal Corruption in Puerto Rico, 1952-2015." Centro Journal, vol. 34, no. 2, 2022, pp. 261–304.

being a longstanding part of Puerto Rico's history as a colony, voter turnout never sank below 72% in the last century. Municipal audit reports reveal a spike in corruption during the 1990s and

into the early 2000s (Bobonis et al 2022, p.271), however, the Puerto Rico State Election Commission reports show only a 3% decrease in voter turnout from 85% in 1988 to 82% in 2004. The declining voter turnout trend would continue throughout the last two decades with a 78% turnout rate in 2012 before reaching the nearly 50% rates that we see in the next two general elections. Despite the presence of corruption scandals during the Rossello administration at the start of the 21st century, voter turnout remained relatively high. During this period, there did not exist a political party that based its platform on anticorruption, potentially providing insight into the steep drop in voter turnout in 2016. Notably, sociotropic corruption voting[21] increases in prominence only after the emergence of a new anti-corruption party due to the notable shift in the intensity of the coverage of corruption in the media. Moreover, they find that in countries where corruption is prevalent, another corruption scandal is not always enough to capture the public's attention, instead, sustained attention from elites committed to politicizing corruption may be necessary (Klašnja et al 2014, p. 3-4). New to Puerto Rican politics in 2016 was the birth of the Citizens Victory Movement (MVC), which garnered unprecedented media attention for candidates. The most prevalent being Alexandra Lúgaro whose platform strongly advocated for anti-corruption initiatives (Ríos Gavino 2020). The addition of Lúgaro to the political arena in 2016 created the attention to corruption necessary to catalyze changes in voter responses, like those demonstrated in the drop in voter turnout after 2016.

2020 Election

In the years preceding the 2020 election, Puerto Rico endured two category-five hurricanes, hundreds of earthquakes, and the chaos of a pandemic. Repeated mishandling of

[21] Sociotropic corruption voting - "vote choice influenced by the perception of corruption in society" (Klašnja et al 2014, p. 4)

recovery funds and corruption scandals made the inability of the corrupt government to care for the lives of its citizens all too evident. Despite the implementation of the FOMB in 2016, federal funds were still misappropriated. Villanueva highlights the swarming of private entities to secure government contracts following the disbursement of funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), arguing some of whom were not qualified to respond to the humanitarian crisis (Villanueva 2019, p.193). Villanueva cites the receipt of a $37.5 million contract to manage CDBG-DR funds by the Foundation of Puerto Rico, a think tank dedicated to lobbying in favor of tourism to attract foreign capital, without submitting a proposal to demonstrate their qualifications. Under the circumstances of major catastrophes, like Hurricanes Irma and Maria, accessing reconstruction funds becomes a critical means to avoid premature death (Villanueva 2019). As described by the founder of La Clara, a political youth advocacy group, people were "literally fighting for [their] lives," emphasizing how "these elections have been so important because, for the last four years, we've been improvising a country" (Espada 2020). Major protests leading up to the election also bring corruption to the forefront of voter attention during the '*Verano del '19*' (The Summer of '19). The Summer of 2019 was one of the largest protests in island history, during which hundreds of thousands took to the streets to demand the resignation of the scandal-plagued NPP governor, Ricardo Rosselló. The movement was sparked by a leaked chat in which the then-governor and other officials mocked hurricane victims and made comments that led to an investigation into possible corruption (Coto 2020). A historic event that Professor Pedro Cabán describes as marking "the collapse of the colonial state's legitimacy" and setting the stage for the rise of the MVC (Cabán 2019). It is important to understand the extent to which this historic event represents. To many of those present and to the scholars familiar with insular politics in Puerto Rico, the Summer of 2019 is equivalent to a

Puerto Rican storming of the Bastille. An event that changed the course of politics on the island forever. In a first-hand account, Christopher Powers Guimond recalls the improvised popular chant at *La Fortaleza* in 2019

> "¿Y cómo dicen las palomas? …
>
> ¡CorrrrrrrrrrrrrrUptos!"

In their testament to the protest, Powers Guimond emphasizes that "the figure of a corrupt governor, with corrupt values, in a colony of corruption, became a target that focused a multiplicity of claims for decolonial justice into a singular grito in the Verano Boricua" (Powers Guimond 2022, p.382). Demonstrating how corruption took center stage as civil society boiled over in a rejection of the entire power structure. Similarly, Cabán argues

> "an array of factors precipitated the popular uprisings, but the most compelling is that Puerto Ricans collectively came to the distressing realization that their elected officials were as culpable as or more culpable than the federal government for the syndrome of deprivation and hopelessness that marred their daily existence" (Cabán 2020, p.104).

Catalyzed by the leaked chats revealing "the link between the elite's moral rot and monumental corruption and the impoverishment of the people," the protests came in response to people being left for dead by their government following Hurricane María.

> "In the aftermath of Hurricane María, Puerto Ricans who chose not to emigrate came to the frightening realization that their government had abandoned them. Emergency relief was slow or nonexistent, inadequate, and ineptly administered. Puerto Ricans experienced a government incapable of acting, the scale of its incompetence bordering on criminal negligence. The abandoned and neglected communities took on the serious business of survival. Throughout the island, communities organized mutual-aid centers - autonomous, self-managed volunteer organizations that provide an array of services" (Cabán 2020, p.108-109).

More completely, Viera explains:

> *"Situaciones tales como la bancarrota fiscal y las medidas de austeridad establecidas por el gobierno de Puerto Rico, la aprobación de la Ley federal Promesa que creó la Junta de Supervisión Fiscal como instrumento para imponer condiciones restrictivas al manejo del presupuesto, la administración corrupta de recursos públicos, el impacto del Huracán María y el mal manejo de los recursos asignados para la recuperación de la Isla, sirvieron de marco al Verano del 2019."*
> "Situations like the fiscal bankruptcy and the austerity measures established by the government of Puerto Rico, the approval of the federal law PROMESA which created the Financial Oversight Management Board as an instrument to impose restrictive conditions to the budget, the corrupt administration of public resources, the impact of Hurricane María and the poor management of the resources assigned to the recuperation of the island served as a framework to the Summer of 2019" (Viera 2021, p.77).

Moreover, an ethnographic study conducted to discover the motivations of persons who participated for the first time during the Summer of 2019 found that the majority of those interviewed alluded to politics and government corruption as motivations for their participation in the marches (Espada Brignoni 2022). Leading into the 2020 election, the culmination of events catalyzing the Summer of 2019 resulted in the largest outcry against the corruption of the current power structure in Puerto Rican history and placed corruption at the forefront of issues to be addressed at the ballot box for the coming election.

Methods

An analysis of the 2020 gubernatorial election illustrates how the party construction based on status options mitigates 'meaningful' corruption-sanctioning votes, especially by vulnerable communities. 'Meaningful' corruption-sanctioning votes are those that are cast outside of the bipartisan hegemony, as they have a greater potential to change the status quo and sanction corruption. To show how the party structure limits corruption-sanctioning votes, I

analyze the effects of socioeconomic vulnerability on changed votes[22] for each of the 78 municipalities from the 2016 to 2020 gubernatorial election, and on total vote share. In doing so, I assume that the new votes for '3rd party' candidates are representative of corruption-sanctioning votes. For both elections, I group the votes into 3 options. The first is the incumbent pro-statehood New Progressive Party. The second option is the autonomist Popular Democratic Party, labeled as the 'opposition party.' The third option is an aggregate of independent candidates, the Puerto Rican Independence Party, and other non-status-defined parties. I utilize linear regression methods to determine the effect of socioeconomic vulnerability on corruption-sanctioning votes using variables of poverty, higher education, and race[23]. Despite Rosselló, the incumbent governor, not being a candidate in the 2020 gubernatorial election, research shows us that voters extend corruption-sanctioning votes to the party and not the politician alone (Slomczynski and Shabad 2011). Moreover, I use race as a metric of vulnerability because of the history of racial inequalities in Puerto Rico, and because research provides "empirical support for the notion that ethnoracially marginalized communities are less likely to elicit government responsiveness during disaster recoveries," and the subsequent decrease in incumbent vote retention for these groups (Tormos-Aponte et al 2021, p.8). I hypothesize that less vulnerable municipalities will be more likely to cast their corruption-sanctioning votes outside of the bipartisan hegemony. However, race presents an interesting caveat where I hypothesize that as the percentage of individuals identifying as white increases in a municipality, the share of '3rd party' votes will decrease in the 2020 gubernatorial election. This is because of the quicker

[22] Changed votes reflect the change in the percentage of the vote share for each party from 2016 to 2020 for each municipality.
[23] Variables reflect information gathered from the U.S. Census Bureau. Poverty is the percentage of persons in poverty for each municipality. Higher education is the percentage of persons older than 25 with at least a bachelor's degree in each municipality. Race is the percentage of people identifying as white-only in each municipality.

response times to of energy restoration crews revealed in the Tormos-Aponte paper, making these population more susceptible to engaging in clientelism.

Moreover, the socioeconomic indicators that I chose double as indicators of political efficacy[24]. "Higher levels of education and social status (measured by income or class or a combination of the three) are the most consistently significant predictors of political action across a variety of countries (Anderson & Beramendi 2008). Literature has consistently suggested the negative relationship between income inequality and voter turnout (Anderson & Beramendi 2008; Cicatiello et al 2015), however, it differs in explaining why that is. Two different explanations for the correlation between inequality and lower voter turnout are based on resources and political efficacy. The resource theory argues that "the role income plays in individuals' decisions to participate is different from education or social status" by theorizing that "time, money, and civic skills are critical skills for participation" (Anderson & Beramendi 2008, p.281), not easily afforded by lower-income constituencies. Therefore, voting is seen as too costly for the impoverished. Alternatively, according to the relative power theory, "countries characterized by an unequal distribution of income, political power tends to be concentrated in the hands of the richer…this makes them feel they have a chance to influence political outcomes" (Cicatiello et al 2015). Suggesting that in countries where inequality is high, the rich are more likely to distinguish themselves as the governing elite, establishing a sense of greater political efficacy. Similarly, individuals with higher education "participate to a larger extent in political activities than individuals with less education" (Persson 2015, p. 689), exhibiting greater political efficacy. Generally, education is important in promoting support for democratic values and subsequently promoting political participation (Galston 2004). In fact, "the breadth of

[24] "Political efficacy is the 'feeling that political and social change is possible and the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change'" (Schulz 2005, p. 2).

consensus has led some researchers to conclude that education's role as a primary mechanism behind citizenship is generally uncontested" (Mayer 2011, p. 633). Despite some arguments that education serves as a proxy of political participation, "there is also a number of recent studies showing evidence indicating that education actually has a direct causal effect" (Persson 2015, p. 695), as demonstrated by Alexander Mayer's study providing evidence "that post-secondary education advancement has a positive and substantively important causal effect on political participation" (Mayer 2011, p. 644). Education develops the tools and skills relevant to politics and "might also affect political interest and efficacy" (Persson 2015, p. 689). Therefore, it can be noted that income inequality and education are significant indicators of vulnerability and political efficacy. I hypothesize that municipalities with higher vulnerability and lower political efficacy are more likely to cast corruption-sanctioning votes for the opposition party, whereas those municipalities exhibiting less vulnerability and higher political efficacy are more likely to cast "3rd party" corruption-sanctioning votes.

Results

Table 1: Table 1 represents an analysis of the new votes cast for candidates outside of the bipartisan hegemony as an aggregate '3rd party' option based on the difference in votes between the 2016 and 2020 gubernatorial elections for each municipality.

New '3rd Party' Votes

	Coeff.	Std. Error	P-Value
Model 1			
Poverty	-0.111	0.055	0.049
Model 2			
Poverty	-0.091	0.059	0.125
Race [% pop White]	-0.023	0.023	0.304
Model 3			
Poverty	0.064	0.074	0.390
Race [% pop White]	-0.042	0.022	0.063
Higher Ed	0.295	0.093	0.002

Table 2: Table 2 represents an analysis of the total votes cast for candidates outside of the bipartisan hegemony during the 2020 gubernatorial elections for each municipality in a multivariate regression.

Total '3rd party' Vote Share

	Coefficient	Std. error	p-value
Poverty	-0.1829	0.0984	0.0669
Race [% pop White]	-0.0482	0.0294	0.1059
Higher Ed	0.5700	0.1240	0.0000
Intercept	28.0664	6.4748	0.0000

The total turnout for the 2020 election was 54.87% (Comisíon Estatal De Elecciones de Puerto Rico, 2020), following the trend of low voter turnout from the prior election cycle. In comparison to the 2016 election, the dominant two parties, on average, lost significant shares of the gubernatorial vote while '3rd party' candidates gained a significant share. From 2016 to 2020, the average loss in vote share by municipality for the incumbent party (NPP) and the main opposition party (PDP) was -8.78% and -5.87%, respectively. While both of the dominant parties lost significant shares of the vote on average, candidates outside of the bipartisan hegemony as an aggregate group gained 14.08% on average. According to the literature, low voter turnout and decreased candidate support are indicative of the effects of corruption on voting (Stockemer et al. 2012; Chong et al 2015; Klašnja et al 2014). I assume that those new votes for the '3rd party' candidates are representative of voters who sought to sanction corruption at the ballot box. An analysis of these new '3rd party' votes present interesting information. In a multivariate regression including poverty, higher education, and race and with new '3rd party' votes as the dependent variable, poverty showed to have a weak, but positive correlation (coefficient = 0.64; p-value = 0.39). Interestingly, when run as a single variable regression with the same dependent

variable, poverty showed a stronger, negative correlation with new ‘3rd party votes (coefficient = -0.11; p-value = 0.049). Moreover, after running another multivariate regression, this time only including poverty and race, poverty again showed a negative correlation (coefficient = -0.091) with a greater statistical significance than the first multivariate regression, though still relatively insignificant (p-value = 0.125). This leads me to believe that potential collinearity between poverty and higher education may have skewed the coefficient for poverty. Still, the other regressions presenting a negative correlation between poverty and the new ‘3rd party’ votes present interesting results aligning with the hypothesis. Moreover, in both multivariate regressions higher education is positively correlated with new ‘3rd party’ votes in 2020, with robust statistical significance (coefficient=0.24; p-value = 0.002). This indicates that the higher the percentage of voters over the age of 25 with a bachelor's degree in a municipality, the higher the percentage of votes that were changed to ‘3rd party’ options. Additionally, the multivariate regression tables show municipalities with a higher percentage of white-only identifying voters were negatively correlated with new ‘3rd party’ votes (coefficient = -0.04; p-value = 0.06). Though weakly correlated, ‘whiter’ populations were less likely to cast corruption-sanctioning votes for ‘3rd party’ options during the 2020 gubernatorial election. The results of the regression tables mostly align with my hypothesis indicating that vulnerable populations were less likely to cast corruption-sanctioning votes outside of the bipartisan hegemony with the caveat of race. However, the limited variables in the regression only explain about 14% of the ‘3rd party’ vote change (R^2 = 0.1412). Though, exemplary of the argument the 2020 elections in Puerto Rico present an interesting case study for voter response to corruption in a colonial context ripe for deeper and more robust analysis.

When analyzing the composition of each party's total vote share during the 2020 election, the results are similar to the changed votes. However, these votes are not all indicative of corruption-sanctioning votes. Rather, the analysis of party vote share says more about the total vote composition during the 2020 election. The composition of '3rd party' votes show negative correlations for poverty (coefficient = -0.182; p-value = 0.067) and whiteness (coefficient = -0.048; p = 0.106, and a positive correlation for higher education (coefficient = 0.570; p-value < 0.001). The results appear to support the argument that less vulnerable communities are more likely to cast their votes for '3rd party' candidates with the caveat of race as a metric for vulnerability.

Analysis

I provide two mechanisms for why less vulnerable groups are more likely to cast "3rd party" votes. The first suggests that voting outside of the bipartisan hegemony is too costly, especially as it runs the risk of losing access to clientelist goods like timely power restoration, aligning with the resource theory. Prior studies demonstrate the use of the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA), the public corporation responsible for managing power restoration crew deployments post-María, as a political tool citing the documented history of being used for political gain. The 2022 Tormos-Aponte et al study found that "voters assign greater responsibility to governors than local elected officials (e.g mayors) for their performance in the process of allocating disaster recovery resources," especially as "local elected officials distanced themselves from the handling of the power outage, as mayors and legislators from both majority parties publicly and privately rebuked the executive branch's handling of the power outage" (Tormos-Aponte et al. 2022, p. 318). Some key findings show that "addresses in municipalities in which the ruling NPP incumbent won the 2016 gubernatorial election were assigned power

restoration crews in less days than in municipalities in which the opposition PDP candidate won." Moreover, "in areas where the NPP had won the 2016 election, the 2020 NPP gubernatorial candidate lost more support, where restoration crew deployments took longer than in areas with a quicker response" (Tormos-Aponte et al 2022, p. 316). They also found that "ethnoracially marginalized communities are less likely to elicit government responsiveness during disaster recoveries" (2022, p.8). The findings of the Tormos Aponte study illustrate the participation of vulnerable communities in clientelism. Another study in Brazil provides "compelling evidence that vulnerability is a key determinant of citizens' participation in clientelism" (Bobonis et al 2022, p.365). Suggesting white and impoverished populations in Puerto Rico to be more likely to engage in clientelism, and therefore vote within the bipartisan hegemony despite corruption. As expected, I found a negative correlation for poverty and race, and the new '3rd party' votes in 2020, revealing socioeconomically vulnerable communities were less likely to vote outside of the bipartisan hegemony in the face of corruption. Moreover, higher education appears to be the variable that best explains voter response to corruption in Puerto Rico during the 2020 election. In all the regressions, higher education always presented the most statistical significance as well as a robust positive correlation with '3rd party' corruption-sanctioning votes and total vote share. As a variable for vulnerability, higher education is shown to lower the income of the bottom share of earners, decreasing income inequality. Therefore, as a less vulnerable group, the educated are less likely to engage in clientelism and seek more effective punishments for corruption at the ballot box. The second explanatory theory grounded in political efficacy potentially provides a better explanation for the higher education results. The results indicate higher education to be the most statistically significant variable for explaining corruption-sanctioning votes cast outside of the bipartisan

hegemony, as well as the total share of '3rd party' votes. Significant research highlights the importance of education and income on political efficacy (Cicatiello et. al 2015; Persson 2015; Galston 2004; Mayer 2011; Pasek et. al 2008). "Higher levels of education and social status (measured by income or class or a combination of the three) are the most consistently significant predictors of political action across a variety of countries (Anderson & Beramendi 2008). Therefore, it can be noted that income inequality and education are significant in indicating vulnerability and political efficacy. The political efficacy explanation posits that "3rd party" votes are perceived as wasted votes, as alternative parties to the status quo do not present themselves as legitimate contenders capable of challenging the bipartisan hegemony. As such, those who have less political efficacy, believing that they are unable to bring about political and social change, are less likely to cast their votes for "3rd party" options. Similarly, those with less political efficacy can doubt the ability of newcomers to change corruption, believing that newcomers will succumb to the pressures enforced by other parties. Low political efficacy would lead vulnerable voters to cast their ballots within the bipartisan hegemony, perceiving other parties as essentially noncontenders. Therefore, it would be expected for populations with more educated voters to have a larger share of votes for '3rd party' candidates, as well as more corruption-sanctioning votes for '3rd party' candidates. Similarly, the explanation also supports the opposite results for poverty, given that income inequality decreases political efficacy.

When analyzing vulnerability through a racial dimension, we see a negative correlation for the white-only identifying population and new 3rd party votes (coefficient = -0.041; p-value = 0.063). Indicating that the non-ethnoracially marginalized populations were less likely to cast corruption-sanctioning votes outside of the dominant two-party options. Other studies provide insight into this phenomenon. The Tormos Aponte study found that ethnoracially marginalized

groups were more likely to wait longer periods before receiving power restoration, and longer restoration times were positively correlated with less incumbent support. I expand on this finding to show where those sanctioning votes go based on racial variables, illustrating that white-identifying populations were less likely to change their vote to '3rd party'. I attribute this phenomenon to not only the clientelist distribution of resources, but the historic nature of racial politics on the archipelago dating back to the 19th century. As Luis González explains, the black and mulatto sectors in Puerto Rico were historically the first groups to embody a true nationalist sentiment perceiving the archipelago as their home nation, and I believe this continues to effect voting today. The findings presented for corruption-sanctioning votes support the claim that socioeconomically vulnerable groups are less likely to cast '3rd party' corruption-sanctioning votes in Puerto Rico. More broadly, the results reveal that the corruption and austerity measures that have deepened public debt and poverty have also reinforced electoral support for the NPP and the PDP.

Conclusion

This study aims to show how Puerto Rico's party structure perpetuates corruption and stalls political transition. As Luis Martínez-Fernández points out:

> "Two matters make the status-centric nature of the island's main parties misleading – actually, dishonest. First, Puerto Rico cannot single-handedly determine its final political status. Congress has the last word. Thus, insular politicians continue to promise something they cannot deliver. They have been spinning their wheels for decades on what is essentially a nonissue" (Martínez-Fernández 2023, p.247).

Yet Puerto Rico maintains a party structure rooted in the oligarchic nature of Spanish insular rule during the 19th century. In its contemporary form, this party structure allows for a bipartisan

hegemony of parties defined by their integration with the United States, occupied by politicians who promise their loyalty to the well-being of the most vulnerable in Puerto Rico, only to punish them with their policy actions. In doing so, they exploit the local population by promising a prosperous future connected to federal funding and U.S. citizenship while exacerbating poverty through austerity measures and corruption scandals that make access to the U.S. job market and federal funding a necessity. In the process, Puerto Ricans are forced to bear the consequences of the accumulated debt in the form of austerity measures, cutting wages and access to resources, like education and health services, ultimately increasing their vulnerability. The findings of this paper illustrating higher education as being an extremely significant and robust indicator of political efficacy empowering voter action against corrupt parties brings new light to the Ricky Rosselló administration focusing budget cuts on education. The implications suggest an administration intent on making a population submissive to clientelism and corruption. Not only do the austerity measures not provide avenues for generating income, they continue to deepen the island government's reliance on financing public expenditures. This process allowed Puerto Rico's financial sovereignty to fall into the hands of the Financial Oversight Management Board, which is occupied by Wall Street investors proposing more austerity measures to be approved by the corrupt and keep Puerto Rico in debt. As the wealth of the local population is squeezed out, corrupt parties with access to critical resources and false promises of prosperous political realities capture the votes of the increasingly vulnerable populace. At the federal level, the economic policies and corruption scandals of the PDP and the NPP over the last 60 years have created obstacles to Puerto Rico realizing the decolonized political reality that they promised. In the next section, I will show the effectiveness of Puerto Rico's party structure as a dialogue with

the U.S. Congress and the challenges to Puerto Rico status bills presented in the United States House of Representatives.

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Chapter 3: Corruption Discourse in Congress

To better understand how corruption is operationalized at the federal level, I analyze discourse for the status bills responding to the 2020 election results presented in the U.S. House of Representatives. I center my discourse analysis around H.R. 8393, the Puerto Rico Status Act, which seeks "to enable the people of Puerto Rico to choose a permanent, nonterritorial, fully self-governing political status for Puerto Rico" (117th U.S. Congress, H.R. 8393) and to transition and implement the chosen political status. The 1952 Puerto Rico constitution that established the Commonwealth intended to place Puerto Rico in a compact to allow the Island more freedoms than a territorial designation (Maldonado 2006). However, without explicitly stating that the U.S. would yield sovereignty over the islands, the Puerto Rico Constitution failed to establish a nonterritorial status designation. Therefore, the island remained under Congressional authority through the Territory Clause of the U.S. Constitution. In the eyes of Luis Muñoz Marin, one of the main contributors to the Commonwealth, Puerto Rico had obtained self-government through its fiscal autonomy (Maldonado 2006). This remained until the passing of PROMESA in 2016, delegating Puerto Rico's fiscal autonomy into the hands of the Financial Oversight and Management Board in response to the Island's debt crisis. The significance of this bill rang through Puerto Rico, illuminating its continued colonial condition, and continues to be felt today as austerity measures punish vulnerable communities. The Puerto Rico Status Act would designate a nonterritorial status to the island, which intends to end the political arrangement that allows for predatory and extractive practices contributing to the debt crisis. H.R. 8393 comes as a response to a 'yes or no' referendum to pursue statehood in November of 2020, which garnered majority support. The November referendum resulted in a 51.5% 'yes' vote for statehood, with a 56% electoral participation rate (Comisíon Estatal De Elecciones de

Puerto Rico, 2020). The Puerto Rico Status Act comes as a compromise between two previous bills, H.R. 1522, the Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act, and H.R. 2070, the Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2021, which were introduced in the Spring of 2021 and had two hearings before the Committee on Natural Resources with testimonies from Insular politicians, citizens, and activists. Despite H.R. 8393 dying in the Senate in 2022, congressional discourse on the Puerto Rico Status Act and the two other associated bills provides ample data for discourse analysis illuminating the nature of the relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S., as well as revealing how insular corruption obstructs congressional action

The two preceding bills, H.R. 1522 and H.R. 2070, had two hearings together in April and June of 2021 before the Committee on Natural Resources. H.R. 1522, sponsored by Representative Soto from Florida, and cosponsored by the Puerto Rico Resident Commissioner, Jennifer González-Colón, holds a 'yes or no' vote for statehood admission. Should the majority vote 'yes,' the bill outlines a fixed deadline for Puerto Rico to be admitted into the Union. On the other hand, H.R. 2070 provides a much more elaborate route. Sponsored by Representative Velásquez from New York, and co-sponsored by Representative Ocasio-Cortez from New York, the Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2021 recognizes "the right of the People of Puerto Rico to call a status convention through which the people would exercise their natural right to self-determination," and outlines the appropriations for an educational campaign and the process for a joint resolution to ratify the approved referendum vote in the United States Congress (H.R 2070). The hearings on the two bills in the middle of 2021 included testimonies provided by social and political actors from Puerto Rico. The analysis of these hearings provides insight into how political interests on the island are expressed and filtered for the digestion of the U.S. Congress. One notable difference in the approach taken by the pro-statehood camp, advocating

for H.R. 1522, is the framing of the issue around civil rights and the ethical dilemma of veterans who are unable to vote for their commander-in-chief. By framing the status issue as one of civil rights, statehood proponents effectively frame the status issue within the confines of the U.S. Constitution, raising concerns of equality and alluding to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In her official statement, Resident Commissioner Ms. González-Colón quotes: "Congress has the chance to make clear that when American citizens ask for equality and justice, they will get equality and justice as American citizens. Not that we will welcome a proposal to make them be 'separate but equal'" (House - Committee of Natural Resources, 4/14/2021). A few things can be noted from this quote. Starting with the allusion to Jim Crow era 'separate but equal' laws that ended with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which frames the Puerto Rican status issue within the U.S. Constitution, applying the same moral implications held during the Civil Rights Movement of equality and justice. In comparison, advocates for alternative status options to statehood differentiate the Puerto Rican nation as being separate from that of the U.S., a sentiment reflected in their efforts to frame the status issue in terms of international law. The framing of the status issue around international law implies a conflict between two distinct polities, rather than a domestic conflict under the statutes of a single constitution. This distinction is clearly addressed in the statements of the Director of the Caribbean Institute of Human Rights, Annette Martinez-Orabona:

> "One fundamental aspect that is repeatedly missing in this discussion is that self-determination is first and foremost a fundamental human right, which is well-defined by specific international norms. This set of norms has been accepted by the United States when it signed and ratified one of the most important international human rights treaties, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which very clearly establishes, under Article 1, the right to self-determination. This means that self-determination is not a matter of purely internal or domestic jurisdiction. It is actually a matter of international relations (Martinez-Orabana, House - Committee of Natural Resources 6/16/2021).

The framing of the status issues as domestic or international has implications larger than what law the U.S. Congress is expected to ultimately abide by. The implications for how to frame the issue manifest in the representation of Puerto Ricans as U.S. citizens vs Americans. The difference between the two is significant in the status discussion, especially as it pertains to which status political actors advocate for. This distinction is often made by conservatives in the U.S. Congress and pro-independence camps on the archipelago who hold that Puerto Ricans represent a culturally distinct nation separate from the rest of the U.S. During the Committee Markup on H.R. 8393, Republican representative Mr. Rosendale clearly delineates Puerto Rico as separate from the United States contesting "I would also like to say that how is it possible that we as Congress can defer the exclusive control of this choice to another country's representative?" (Rosendale 1:14:17 7.20.22). Mr. Rosendale's reference to a representative from Puerto Rico as being from "another country" clearly illuminates the disposition of Puerto Rico as being separate from the United States, though still technically U.S. citizens. This perception is shared by Puerto Rican Senator María De Lourdes Santiago, a member of the Puerto Rican Independence Party, who describes the people of the island "as a distinct Caribbean and Latin American nation" arguing that "the immense majority of the population – though U.S. citizens do not think themselves as Americans and allude principally to considerations of economic convenience as reasons to prefer statehood" (House - Committee of Natural Resources, 4/14/2021). This distinction of inclusion or exclusion can be seen in the referencing of Puerto Ricans as U.S. citizens or Americans. The reference to Puerto Ricans as U.S. citizens calls to the statutory nature of U.S. citizenship for Puerto Ricans, leaving room for cultural differences, whereas 'Americans' includes Puerto Ricans in the larger national culture of the United States. For those with a vested interest in island colonies receiving a decolonized political status, the

disposition of Puerto Ricans as Americans has significant importance. Visible in the frequent references of island inhabitants as "our fellow Americans in Puerto Rico" (1:18:43 7.20.2022) by a Democrat representative from Guam, Mr. San Nicolas, during the Committee Markup on July 20, 2022. By including the inhabitants of U.S. island possessions in the American nation, the moral arguments of unequal representation hold significantly more weight in the minds of Congress, demanding more immediate action. However, so long as the people on U.S. territories are distinguished as separate from those of the U.S., Congress will not be pressured to extend influence over domestic politics to them or grant them sovereignty unless it is in the interest of the United States. Therefore, the differences in this perception play a critical role in the moral and ethical arguments presented before Congress. During the debates over Puerto Rico's status, the moral obligation of Congress to provide a decolonized status to Puerto Rico is central to the argument. Especially evident in the statements of the co-sponsor to the Puerto Rico Status Act (H.R. 8393), Democrat representative from New York, Ms. Velásquez, who frequently declared "We have the moral obligation to decolonize Puerto Rico" (Velásquez 43:52 CoNR 7.20.22). In doing so, the debate is easily misguided by those who aim to prevent Congressional action on Puerto Rico's status. The aim of the Puerto Rico Status Act (H.R. 8393) was to provide a decolonized status option and recognize the current colonial condition of the status quo as no different than before the establishment of the Puerto Rican Constitution in 1952 as the archipelago remains under the plenary power of the U.S. Congress provided by the Territory Clause of the U.S. Constitution. This is evident in the passing of PROMESA and the Supreme Court case *Puerto Rico v. Sánchez Valle 2016,* as mentioned previously. Despite the colonial reality of Puerto Rico being illuminated in 2016, many of the Republican representatives argue in favor of keeping the Commonwealth as a viable status option. During the committee markup

in July of 2022 on H.R. 8393, Republican Representative Mr. McClintock argued, “The options don’t include the most obvious option, that is to remain as a Commonwealth” (McClintock 1:02:00 7.20.22). The same sentiment of maintaining the status quo as a viable option is embodied in the proposed amendments 70 and 71[25]. The argument for Congressional action on the status of Puerto Rico is largely underpinned by moral arguments differentiated by their basis in international or domestic law. This illuminates a fundamental conflict in the perceptions of Puerto Rico and its role with the United States. The result becomes a convoluted process of conflicting arguments that quickly cloud the discussion. Those who frame the discussion within domestic law evoke civil rights for a group of people within the American nation. The result is conflicting arguments about whether Puerto Ricans will vote Republican or Democrat, and to whom their inclusion in domestic politics will benefit. Conversely, others frame the issue internationally as a relationship between two separate nations evoking human rights. This group maintains that Puerto Rico is a distinct nation. What becomes quickly confusing is there is no consistency between political parties’ vested interests and their stance on the nationality of Puerto Ricans. Many pro-statehood politicians, though grounding their arguments on Puerto Ricans' inclusion in the American nation, often support the notion of Puerto Rico as a cultural nation, distinct from the U.S. In the process, the pursuit of Congressional action becomes a storm of ideological crosswinds preventing that pursuit from ever taking flight. The one clear path to success is dependent on the bipartisan nature of the U.S. Congress being convinced that Puerto Rico’s inclusion will reinforce either the Democrats' or the Republicans’ position. A pursuit subject to the current composition of Congress and easily dissuaded. In this way, the argument

[25] Amendment No. 70 brought forth by Mr. McClintock during the Committee of Natural Resources markup on H.R. 8393 on July 7, 2020, would add the option for the current commonwealth status, while No. 71 would add a none of the above option.

for Congressional action is quickly made murky by contradicting claims of what is a moral course of action for Congress to take, how to consider the position of Puerto Ricans relative to the rest of the U.S., and the reality of the interests of the U.S. Congress.

Moreover, insular partisan politics provide even more confusion on what the desires of Puerto Ricans are regarding their political future. The main avenues of dialogue are the election results of status referendums and general elections. Within this layer of dialogue, corruption narratives are swiftly mobilized to obstruct and cloud communication between the two polities by delegitimizing election results. One of the main reasons why two bills were presented in 2021 is because of the doubts surrounding the New Progressive Party's electoral success and the doubts surrounding the legitimacy of the pro-statehood votes. This doubt culminates in the expression of a need for a 'fair and inclusive' process. Because of the corruption narratives that surround the 2020 elections, former Governor and member of the pro-commonwealth Popular Democratic Party, Anibal Acevedo-Vilá contends that election results should be analyzed through a different perspective in his prepared statement writing:

> "Our opposition to statehood is based on historical, cultural, national identity and economic realities…Yes, the people of Puerto Rico voted 52.5% to 47.5% in favor of statehood in a non-binding referendum held on Election Day 2020. But that was a referendum rejected by the U.S. Department of Justice, and by 4 of the 5 political parties in Puerto Rico because all the other options for the future political relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S. were excluded from the ballot."

He continues on to list the context in which the referendum's results ought to be analyzed starting with:

> "1.The pro-statehood candidate for the Governor won with only 33% of the votes, while the other 67% voted for a candidate for Governor who did not promote making Puerto Rico the 51st state.
> 2.On Election Day, Puerto Ricans elected new anti-statehood majorities in both the Puerto Rico House of Representatives and the Senate. A majority of mayors elected in Puerto Rico also oppose statehood"

Moreover, the former Governor, Mr. Acevedo-Vilá, provides data from a Hart Research Poll, which finds:

> "When only given the yes or no to statehood option, 15% of those who vote yes, really support one of the other options not given to them in the question that included all the options. Having been deprived of their alternative, they voted for statehood." (Acevedo-Vilá 4.14.21).

This language of inclusivity is also the center of the main sponsor of H.R. 2070, representative from New York Nydia Velásquez, who stresses "that any such process needs to be fair, inclusive, and democratic" and the conversation should be "about a process that respects the will of the people and not how to stack the deck toward particular status options, much less using millions of dollars in public funds to skew the outcome" (House - Committee of Natural Resources, 4/14/2021). In this way, corruption convolutes communication between the two polities along their main lines of dialogue. Resulting in demands for a more inclusive process to avoid the 'stacking of votes' towards one option, and a highly complicated bill destined to die in the Senate for its procedural shortcomings and complications. The clouding of communication with corruption discourse not only complicates the process of resolving the status issue, but it polarizes Congressmembers' opinions of Puerto Rico towards that of a perpetrator to be condemned and held accountable.

At a federal level, corruption narratives operate to assign accountability for the debts incurred on the island. Individual dispositions on which polity is responsible for the debts incurred coincide with a sentiment of them being the perpetrator, in what becomes the perpetrator/victim binary defining the relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico in the

contemporary status debate. Martinez-Orabana articulates congressional responsibility in her prepared statement writing:

> "The outstanding debt that Puerto Ricans are being forced to pay is in itself a violation of the human right to their survival as peoples, and runs contrary to the fiduciary obligations that the U.S. has over the territory… the accumulated debt is the sole responsibility of the colonial authority in control. Sovereignty and responsibility go hand in hand" (House-Committee of Natural Resources, 6/16/21).

This sentiment is echoed by Puerto Rican Senate member, María de Lourdes Santiago who writes in her opening statement:

> "Puerto Rico's status problem cannot be attributed to Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico has been the victim and the United States has been the perpetrator. Such an egregious breach of fiduciary duty throughout the 20th century and until today by a nation that thinks itself as a beacon of democracy can only be described as stunning and shameful" (House - Committee of Natural Resources, 4/14/2021)

These statements clearly emphasize the perception of Puerto Rico's debt and economic crisis as being the fault of the United States Congress which maintains sovereignty over, and thus responsibility over, the insular financial affairs. This sentiment becomes embodied by advocates for H.R. 8393 following the compromise of H.R. 2070 and H.R. 1522, whereas the disposition of the opposition holds Puerto Rico responsible for the debt incurred. The discourse surrounding H.R. 8393 differs substantially because the discussion was held within the U.S. House of Representatives with little, and often no, representation for Puerto Ricans. What becomes apparent is the operationalization of corruption as a means to hold Puerto Rico responsible for the debt incurred, absolving Congress of their duties over the territory. This dynamic is

illuminated in the statements of Mr. Rosendale in the bill markup heading into the third hour of discussion he proclaims “We’ve heard lightening excuses for the bad debt that’s been acquired by the country and the declarations of victimization of why they can’t afford to pay their current bills” (Congress - Committee of Natural Resources, 7/20/2022) during the debate over Ms. Boebert’s amendment #4 that aimed to strike federal funding appropriations for a voter education campaign from the bill. Despite being out of context, Mr. Rosendale cannot withhold himself from expressing his disbelief in the Island’s victimization over debt payments during a discussion about funding for a voter education campaign. Moreover, earlier in the meeting, Rosendale expressed that he does not “think it’s productive to begin the first steps toward independence and self-determination with the United States by curing or forgiving debt for another nation and financing their elections”(Congress - Committee of Natural Resources, 7/20/2022). A few things can be extracted from Rosendale’s statements as well as body language. During his statements about curing debt, he is hunched over the desk with a hand at his brow, demonstrating agitation in his posture and frustrated tone. Moreover, in his statements, Mr. Rosendale clearly distinguishes the insular government as being that of a separate nation and assumes the outcome of a bill that includes statehood would be independence despite the results of the gubernatorial elections and plebiscite being in favor of statehood. However, most important to this analysis are the statements of victimization and the concerns surrounding debt. In this interaction over the bill, Rosendale clearly positions the island outside of the American nation and is determined to hold the island accountable for the debts incurred, culminating in his frustration over continued federal funding in the form of appropriations for a voter education campaign. This same sentiment of holding Puerto Rico accountable for debts incurred is reflected in the number of proposed amendments that seek to address ensuring debt payments are

made prior to the passing of the bill. Five of the seventeen proposed amendments during the committee markup on July 20, 2022 sought to secure debt payments. The next most addressed issue in proposed amendments was the provisions included within the Puerto Rico Status Act that provided appropriations for education campaigns, transition periods for citizenship and continued federal funding, and work and travel authorizations. The rest of the amendments either aim to include the status quo, require a super majority to ratify the vote, or concern national security interests. The debates over these amendments revealed the difference in perceptions over the victim/perpetrator binary through the conflicts over 'special treatment' and 'reparations.' The proponents for the bill share the sentiment that Puerto Rico is the victim of a one-sided relationship that has been conducive to the decline in socioeconomic conditions experienced on the island today, and as such, should be provided with provisions as a form of reparation for the lack of fiduciary responsibility of Congress. On the contrary, the opposition to the bill holds that the island is responsible for the debt and finds the actions of the U.S. government to be reflective of special treatment represented by preferential provisions included in the bill and federal funding. In his opening statements to the debate on amendments 9 and 10 that would remove travel and work authorizations and strike the citizenship transition period, Mr. Hice says these provisions "seem like special terms for a foreign nation" and "from where I sit, if the people of Puerto Rico want to be independent then that means there is no special treatment and no special benefits from the U.S. federal system" (House - Committee of Natural Resources 7/20/2022). Dispositions of special treatment are also illuminated during a debate over federal funding for the island visible in Mr. Westerman's quote:

> "I believe we also in Congress changed the Medicaid laws to allow more Medicaid funding to flow to Puerto Rico without imposing the federal income tax. And I still find it hard to believe how you can say somebody has been treated unfairly when they've got way more funding than any state has received on

> disaster aid…So I just take exception to the fact that Congress, that the federal government has played favors with states, and that Puerto Rico has been mistreated with disaster funding. When the amount of funding is way, way out of proportion to what's going to Puerto Rico versus what's going to states who have had similar disasters" (House - Committee of Natural Resources, 7/20/2022)

What becomes increasingly evident in the debates across the aisle is the contrasting dispositions surrounding Puerto Rico's relationship to the U.S., as being one of a victim or a perpetrator of corruption with preferential treatment. The advocates for the Puerto Rico Status Act contend that Puerto Rico has been on the receiving end of an unfair relationship with the United States that has culminated in the economic crisis that impacts the island today. Conversely, the opposition holds the island responsible for the debt incurred and suggests the island has received favorable, or 'special' treatment. Demonstrating how each camp has different perceptions of who the perpetrator is within the victim/perpetrator binary illuminated in corruption discourse.

Discourse analysis of congressional hearings regarding status bills for Puerto Rico reveals the avenues of dialogue and the effects corruption has in preventing Congression action in two ways. First, corruption narratives surrounding insular elections convolute the dialogue between the people of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Congress. In the process, the results of status referendums and general election outcomes, the official source of dialogue, become clouded and easily delegitimized by dissenting voices inciting confusion and preventing Congressional accountability. Moreover, these corruption cases most often come from parties whose political realities rely heavily on economic dependency on the colonial authority. Secondly, corruption narratives paint Puerto Rico as a perpetrator responsible for the debt incurred. Allowing the U.S. government to exercise its colonial authority by enacting economic violence on the island. This sentiment is the driving force behind the passing of PROMESA and the implementation of the Financial Oversight and Management Board, whose austerity measures exacerbate the burdens of

economic crisis on the most vulnerable communities. These violent acts are apparent in the austerity measures of the FOMB and in the withholding of $20 billion in hurricane relief following Hurricane Maria in 2017. A 2021 NBC article details:

> "the tensions between the [Department of Housing and Urban Development] and the Office of Management and budget resulted in unprecedented procedural hurdles that produced delays in the disbursement of the congressionally approved funds…The Office of Inspector General began the review in March 2019 after Congress asked it to look into hurricane aid delays as the island sought to recover from a storm that resulted in the deaths of 2,975 people and triggered the world's second-longest blackout. Seven months after the probe was launched, two top HUD officials admitted to knowingly missing the congressionally mandated deadline to issue a notice that would have unlocked billions in federal recovery funds to Puerto Rico. Carson later defended his agency's actions by echoing Trump talking points – citing concerns about corruption, fiscal irregularities, and 'Puerto Rico's capacity to manage these funds'" (Acevedo 2021)

Debt payments and federal funding are points of confrontation that illuminate the different perceptions of each party's respective designation in the perpetrator/victim binary defining the U.S. and Puerto Rico relationship. Revealing the effects of Insular corruption on the disposition of U.S. Congressmen, culminating in violent action against the island. In this way, corruption is mobilized to absolve Congress of its fiduciary responsibility, while continuing to trap the Island in the political conditions conducive to corruption and economic crisis in a self-perpetuating cycle.

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Conclusion

The failure of the party structure to communicate effectively the desires of the island's inhabitants reflects its conception during the 19th-century Spanish oligarchy. During this time, the silencing of the peasantry was critical to the economic interests of the insular elite and the metropole. The same has been true for the first century of American dominion over Puerto Rico. The result produced a similar autonomous state. For decades, the political relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S. has been dominated by conversations of the ethical dilemmas of maintaining a colony and the moral duties implied by the U.S. Constitution, with little discussion of more concrete objectives, other than securing debt payments. Unfortunately, this results from a political structure established by a disconnected political elite who have made a sport of buying votes. As such, they have preyed on the colonial condition of Puerto Rico and benefited greatly from the inaction of the U.S. Congress. It is no surprise that their real policy actions have aligned with the most conservative of American politics and have continuously enforced the austerity measures that sterilize the soil of innovation from which real economic growth can take root. It is no surprise that the same political elite have continued to finance public expenditures, making a nation dependent on debt. It is no surprise that once all economic drivers were uprooted that they use public resources to buy support. Following the Summer of 2019 protests, there was a monumental shift, according to Pedro Cabán. One that had been festering since the start of the century. A shift away from the partisan politics of the State and refocusing towards community organizations determined to address the real issues the archipelago's inhabitants are facing. Vanesa Ribas reveals how this sentiment took root in the *Comunidades Especiales*[26], following

[26] "poverty alleviation program, initiated by the Puerto Rico government in 2001, mandated citizen participation, established new funds, and aimed to coordinate access to existing funds, for the social and economic development of poor communities" (Ribas 2013, p.403)

their implementation in 2001. Highlighting the development of oppositional consciousness[27] among community leaders whose "strong antipartisan political orientation reflects their rejection of a pervasive political culture they see as individualizing and disempowering to poor communities" (Ribas 2013, p.409). What community leaders were advocating for was the ability to discuss the issues of the nation without diluting the conversation into one's association with a status option. Unfortunately, as corruption continues to pervade insular politics and political parties that seek to address it, like the MVC, get consumed into the game of status partisanship as soon as they present themselves as a legitimate contender. After beating out the PIP candidate by a slim margin in 2020, the MVC merged with the PIP for the 2024 elections, where they were able to garner an unprecedented share of the votes. Even still, nearly half of the island has not participated in the last three election cycles. The historically low turnouts have illuminated something that conservative voices in Congress now point to in opposition to proposed status bills. The slender majority of the votes that have supported statehood in the last three election cycles have ill-convinced conservatives in Congress of Puerto Ricans' desires to be the 51st state despite the NPP's decades-long electoral success. It appears that the low voter turnout have become evident of a Puerto Rican constituency disenchanted by the electoral system that has offered them two "safe" party options to vote for, and a third that has been associated with heinous acts of violence for centuries as a consequence of supporting. However, for the first time in the nation's history, the Independence Party received a healthy share of the vote in 2024. As it

[27]" Mansbridge (2001:1, 5) defines subordinate groups as having an oppositional consciousness "when they claim their previously subordinate identity as a positive identification, identify injustices done to their group, demand changes in the polity, economy, or society to rectify those injustices, and see other members of their group as sharing an interest in rectifying those injustices." A more developed oppositional consciousness "includes identifying a specific dominant group as causing and in some way benefiting from those injustices" and "seeing certain actions of the dominant group as forming a 'system' of some kind that advances the interests of the dominant group" among other features." (Ribas 2013)

has been throughout history, the new party presenting real potential for political support (the MVC) was swallowed by the 3-option structure of Puerto Rican colonial politics, coalescing third-party votes under a single banner. In the face of the realization of the Commonwealth's inadequacies and inability to progress further, the PDP lost significant votes, raising PIP votes up to a historic 32.66% (Comisíon Estatal De Elecciones de Puerto Rico, 2024). Despite a slight increase in election turnout up to 57.61%, the structure of the Commonwealth still presents what Cabán calls an "ideologically sterile and meaningless electoral contest between proponents of statehood and commonwealth" (Cabán 2021, p. 35). Only now are the proponents of the commonwealth splintering into either statehood or independence camps. Cabán effectively illuminates the inability of any of the parties to bring about real status change from their position. Voting PIP does not change the structural issues that have created the exploitation of dependency by island politicians. Instead, it will reposition a different group in the same structure, likely to submit to the political pressures without any real path to economic prosperity, and therefore, status change. The result is the perpetuation of elites protected by a veneer of caring for the island's most vulnerable people while approving 'development' projects aimed at bringing more jobs to the island. That in reality are mainly subservient jobs to the 'mainland' tourists who come to enjoy the resorts built over sterilized land like those proposed by the *Escencia* project in Cabo Rojo.

Quijano makes three forms of power evident in the coloniality of power. Control over violence, economics, and ideology. Since 1898, violence in the form of nationalist movements has failed. Up until the turn of the early 2000s, the nationalist movement had been seemingly dominated by guerrilla movements inspired by those that had taken place around the rest of Latin America. However, with the turn of the 21st the focal point of the independence movement began

to mirror that of the pro-statehood sector, initiating conversations of Congressional accountability, and moral and ethical obligations to decolonize Puerto Rico. This project contributes to coloniality of power to demonstrate the role of corruption in diluting the voice of the people in democratic contexts, and justifying economic violence. In Puerto Rico's context, corruption has been a significant tool in the perpetuation of the status quo. The results of this project's findings point to a similar conclusion reached by the community leaders nearly two decades ago, illustrated in Ribas's (2013) paper emphasizing the need to decouple status-partisanship from politics. With status partisanship decoupled from Puerto Rican politics, the Puerto Rican voter can more effectively utilize the existing democratic institutions to incentivize political actors to address the real needs of the island's inhabitants. Rather than continuing to allow corrupt politicians to be unpunished at the ballot box.

What becomes more pressing for Puerto Rican politics after decoupling from the status issue is the real pursuit of socioeconomic development that gives the archipelago leverage in discussions with the United States. More important is redirecting the use of Puerto Rico in a way that transitions its position as a fiscally irresponsible asset dominated by the interests of finance capital to one that provides benefits to U.S. national interests while putting Puerto Rico on a path towards statehood or sovereignty. One way of doing so is re-utilizing the Roosevelt Roads for shipbuilding and servicing, establishing Puerto Rico as a critical stop within the global supply chain in the western hemisphere. This not only provides critical economic stimulation to the archipelago but also provides the U.S. insurance against getting cut off from shipbuilding and servicing in Asia. According to the U.S. Naval Institute, "China has 46.59 percent of the global market and is the largest builder, with South Korea second at 29.24 percent, and Japan third with 17.25." Meanwhile, the U.S. has an insignificant 0.13 percent of the global shipbuilding capacity

(Seavy 2024). Moreover, in a joint response to tariffs, these three countries with the overwhelming majority of shipbuilding capacity have established a free trade agreement (Reuters 2025). The threat of which becomes stark as the U.S. and China are currently engaging in a trade war, and American paranoia of the PRC's involvement in key South American trade routes carries the potential to inspire U.S. intervention. SouthComm's operational success is highly dependent on the relationship building between the U.S. and its southern neighbors through consistent and mutually beneficial interaction. One way this has been accomplished is through joint training operations between militaries. However, doing so only provides the immediate incentive of military training without any prolonged effect on a sustained good relationship between parties. Generally, Puerto Rico serves as a symbol in Latin America of the benefits, or downfalls, of a partnership with the U.S. By establishing a strong position within the Hemisphere for business and military protection in the form of shipbuilding and servicing, Puerto Rico is leveraged to demonstrate a strong and influential America capable of catalyzing prosperity in the region and fostering lasting regional cohesion. Bringing economic prosperity to Puerto Rico through repurposing the Roosevelt Roads for shipbuilding improves American shipbuilding capacity and doubles as a soft power initiative, providing a real example of the benefits of cooperation with the U.S. for Latin American countries.

However, I reiterate an efficient public administration is critical to attracting the investments for industries, like shipbuilding. In its current structure, the public administration of Puerto Rico is curtailed by corrupt actors taking advantage of the centuries-long status politics of the archipelago, with no real incentive to significantly improve socioeconomic conditions. By creating a separate body from the main governance structure to deal with the status question, status-partisanship can be taken out of the general elections, redirecting considerable amounts of

attention to address real ground-level issues. One way of doing so was proposed following the 2020 November referendum in H.R. 2070, the Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2021, sponsored by Representative Nydia Velázquez. The bill declared that the legislature of Puerto Rico has the power to call a status convention with delegates to be publicly elected following an education campaign. Conceptually, creating a separate body to manage the status of Puerto Rico holds the potential to open insular politics to handle more pressing issues prerequisite to status change, and should be more seriously considered.

Decolonization is an issue lined with ethical dilemmas and theoretical debates with real consequences for the lives of millions. The moral debates of Puerto Rico's decolonization have proven futile in the face of the conservatives in the U.S. Congress. However, what should be clearly understood by all Congressmen is the U.S. national interest, most often elaborated in the form of wealth accumulation and the protection of the state. Therefore, the ability for real change to happen in Puerto Rico is dependent on diplomats proposing real economic solutions that are mutually beneficial to both partners. In the current global political climate, leveraging the archipelago's advantageous geographic position and the United States' insufficient shipbuilding capacity will be highly beneficial to both the United States and Puerto Rico. However, setting the stage for economic success in Puerto Rico will likely require freeing the civil administration from the tumor that is status partisanship.

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